

**AN EXPLORATION OF CHINESE GRADUATE STUDENTS' EMAIL
COMMUNICATION WITH SUPERVISORS**

by

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ABSTRACT

This study explored Chinese graduate research students' experiences of email writing to supervisors with a qualitative approach. Six Chinese research-based students and two supervisors took part into this study. Through the analysis of the participants' interview data, two sets of themes emerged from the two groups. They were *emotions, perceptions of supervisors, writing approaches, writing problems* and *“good” emails* for students. In terms of the themes on supervisors, they were *traits of Chinese students' emails, perceptions of “good” emails, supervisors' recommended writing strategies* and *emails as a teaching tool*. The analysis of student participants' email samples indicated that Chinese graduates took a different attitude in their emails. They could not differentiate request strategies, and preferred placing their requests behind justifications. English as Second Language (ESL) educators are encouraged to help Chinese graduate students establish a practical English learning plan to improve writing skills.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As the number of international students grows, higher education has become a major export industry in Canada. According to the statistics from Canadian Bureau for International Education (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2012), Canada has ranked as the world's seventh most popular destination for international students, and the international student enrollment has grown from 136,000 in 2001 to over 265,000 in 2012, a 94% increase. Among this population, Chinese students make an important contribution to the Canadian educational environment. Since 2001 the number of Chinese students in Canada has increased from 20,371 to 80,627- a 296% increase. Canada's first position leads the 173 different countries from which student are drawn. A report from the Canada-China Academic Forum (2012) shows the total number of full-time Chinese Ph.D. students grew 27% between 1992 and 2009, while the number of full-time master's students more than doubled.

While the population is increasing, a series of issues have appeared. China does not share the same education philosophy which underpins teaching and learning systems in Canada. Adjusting to the Canadian system is therefore a major challenge for Chinese research students. On the other hand, supervisors are often not aware of the cultural differences nor do they receive training in supervising Chinese students. Hence, effective communication between these two parties has become a very important issue (Ingleby & Chung, 2009).

Email is a hybrid form of communication demonstrating the characteristics of both oral and written discourse (Crystal, 2001; Davis & Brewer, 1997; Gruber, 2000; Matthews, 2000; Rice, 1995). Email communication is being used more often between instructors and students in universities (Hassini, 2006) and has become an important channel, offering students expanded opportunities to interact with supervisors (Bloch, 2002). However, my own experience and conversations with many other international students indicate that students from a culture where computer-mediated communication is not commonly used in university teaching and learning find it difficult to communicate with their professors through emails. Some of the reasons include the followings: lack of prior email experience, poor language competence, and mismatched cultural knowledge.

I was an English teacher in a senior high school in China. Now I am a graduate student in Canada. This transition has enabled me to obtain new perspectives that I could not acquire as a teacher in China. When I came to Memorial University, I was amazed at the advanced technology used in education including the use of the internet, particularly in graduate student/supervisor communication. Although the internet is popular in China, people tend to use traditional ways such as telephone or face-to-face meetings to deliver information. I found it difficult to get used to the computer-mediated communication at the beginning. It always took me a considerable amount of time to write a simple email to my professors. There are two reasons for this. First, I was not taught how to use email for academic communication. Unlike

academic writing, I couldn't find any specific standard or template for email writing. There seemed to be rules but the rules were neither obvious nor consistent. Second, I was uncertain of the cultural norms regarding communication with professors and of their reception of my 'e-letters'. I always felt hesitant to choose the words and sentences to express myself and was curious about what email content and language they wanted to see.

After talking to other graduate students, I found I was not alone. They, too, have endeavored to create a positive image to their professors. However, professors are normally too busy to have face-to-face meetings with them. Most of the time, they communicate with their students on-line. Teachers are highly respected in Chinese culture, and the relationship between students and teachers is more interactive and personal through unscheduled visits, drop-ins and phone calls beyond class hours do occur. This kind of interaction has a strong influence on Chinese students even if they are in a country with a different culture and practice. Chinese students, especially new graduate students, who want to make a good first impression on their professors often feel anxious when they write emails.

Many Chinese students struggled to develop good English writing skills when they were in China. According to the official statistics from the IELTS website (IELTS Research Reports Online Series, 2013), IELTS (IELTS is the International English Language Testing System, a world's proven English language test has two versions – Academic and General. The Academic test is for those who want to study

at a tertiary level in an English-speaking country. This test includes four parts: listening, speaking, reading and writing), Chinese students' average marks on writing (5.2 out of 9.0) rank last place among other international students. One can see why email writing is stressful to them. At the same time, professors also have trouble reading their Chinese students' emails. Stephens, Houser and Cowan (2009) found that instructors are bothered by overly casual email messages and tend to respond negatively to students who write emails in this way. If students are not able to address themselves clearly, it causes misunderstandings. This problem often causes the relationship between teachers and students to deteriorate.

Previous studies on email writing fall into three categories. Some studies focus on exploring the characteristics of email writing (Absalom, 2010; Liu 2011; Mahfouz 2010), indicating that email has advantages which can be used as an effective way to enhance ESL students' learning. Other studies examine the politeness expressed in the email communication based on cultural differences. For example, Bjørge (2007) found that Japanese, Chinese and Korean students tend to use more formal expression in their email communications with their professors. A few studies examined the professors' views of their students' emails. Stephens (2009) indicated that students' casual emails cause negatively affect supervisors responses. However, little has been done on existing studies on Chinese graduate students' email exchanges with their supervisors. Supervisors generally develop closer connections with their research

students than with course-route students. How such exchanges are interpreted by both parties is still unknown.

Hence, the purpose for the study was to investigate Chinese graduate research students' experiences related to email correspondence with supervisors. A further purpose of the study was to provide advice to students on how to improve their email writing and thereby also promoting a positive relationship with their supervisors.

The study contributed to these debates by asking the following questions:

1. What are Chinese graduate students' experiences in their email communication with supervisors?
2. What are the supervisors' experiences in their email communication with Chinese graduate students?
3. What are the commonalities and differences in their views of their experiences?

As the largest university on the eastern coast of Canada, Memorial University is well known for its excellence in many areas with accomplished faculty and modern research resources, which attracts increasingly large number of Chinese students to enrich their learning experiences. By far, there are over six hundred Chinese students in this university (Center for Institutional Analysis and Planning of Memorial University, 2013), a predominant number in contrast to other international students from different countries. It can be speculated that there would be more Chinese

students coming in the future. Under these circumstances, it is important to help these students adapt the new learning environment.

The results of the study will be of interest to international students, in particular, Chinese graduate students, and professors at Canadian universities. It will also inform English-as-second/foreign-language (ESL/EFL) teaching in Canada and other countries (such as in China).

In chapter 2, a solid theoretical base will be set as a guide for this study first. In chapter 3, the method of data collection and analysis will be illustrated in detail. Chapter 4 will provide a large amount of evidence supporting the findings will be presented in the finding chapter. Lastly, chapter 5 will provide a discussion and recommendation to conclude this report.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter contains five parts. A brief introduction and the characteristics of emails were presented to give readers a broad view of the topic of this study. Part two and three focused on two key elements of writing a request email: email genre and politeness. In the next part, I illustrated how email communication shaped students and professors' relationship. Ultimately, studies of Chinese students' emails were introduced to strengthen the theoretical base of this study.

2.1 Email

The rapid advancement of communication technology has caused great changes in the way we interact in our daily lives. One of the most remarkable developments of modern communication is electronic mail (email). Email was initially introduced by the military in the United States in the last century. It soon enjoyed worldwide popularity and was applied to scientific, economic and educational fields. Though the dominance of email is being eroded by increasing new media such as online text chat, audio chat, bulletin boards, streaming video, live web-casting and video conferencing, email is still one of the most widely used communication tools especially in educational settings (Le & Le, 2002).

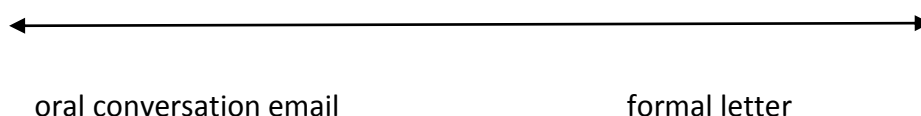
Time and distance is considerably shortened when instructors and students use emails. Instead of making face-to-face appointments, professors often choose to deliver important information to their students through emails (Lightfoot, 2004).

Email delivery is not restricted to geographical regions, and it can be sent with a quick click. This spatial and temporal advantage of emails outweighs the traditional written exchange (Crystal, 2001; Herring, 1996). However, like traditional letters, email interaction is also a form of asynchronous computer-mediated communication (Absalom & Marden, 2004, Warschauer, Shetzer, & Meloni, 2000), which enables senders and receivers to have enough time to organize their thinking before replying. Moreover, as for the second language (L2) learners who feel embarrassed, shy or afraid to express themselves in a face-to-face meeting with native speakers, emails become an effective tool to break these psychological barriers (Richards & Rogers, 1986; Roed, 2003). For those L2 students who are still grappling with English pronunciation, email also offers them some respite.

Email communication can be flexible, spontaneous and natural, and is often more similar to oral expression than the formal letter writing. Some creative email writers use punctuation to express their emotion and to compensate for the lack of visual clues in the writing system (Kitade, 2000). For example, email writers can use question marks to show their uncertainty, ellipsis to show hesitation and ‘:-)’ for a smile. Absalom and Marden (2004) stated “it is an attempt to lend tone and feeling to a medium of communication which is intrinsically decontextualised” (p.412) and they defined this characteristic as “expressivity” in email writing. The above studies attempt to certify that email is a unique communication that is influenced by both oral and written discourse.

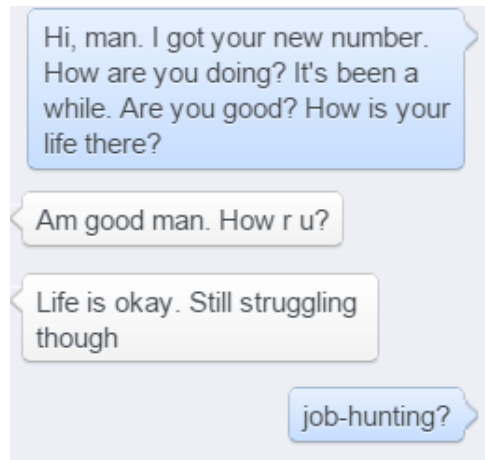
Volckaert-Legrier, Bernicot and Bert-Erboul (2009) investigated adolescents' email writing and found that their emails contained a large number of orthographic deviations not associated with the participants' standard writing ability. That is, many of the adolescents knew how to write correctly and could follow a formal writing standard, but they preferred to write in a less formal way. The authors concluded that for adolescents email language had transformed into a distinct written-language register (the register is a variety of a language used for a particular purpose or in a particular social setting). A further series of studies also provide evidence to support the "hybrid characteristic" of email communications. (Crystal, 2001; Davis & Brewer, 1997; Gruber, 2000; Matthews, 2000; Rice, 1995; Lightfoot, 2006) The diagram (Figure 1) below gives a simple summation of the relationship among email writing, oral and written expression.

Figure 1: Relationship between Oral Conversation, Email and Formal Letter



Further analysis of actual examples will illustrate the hybrid traits of email writing. The first one was excerpted from a conversation which occurred on Facebook. The other one was from a graduate student's email to his supervisor (Figure 2). These two examples are both from my own correspondence.

Figure 2: A Conversation on Facebook



As can be seen in the first sample, both parties in the conversation used informal expressions such as “Am good man” “How r u?” and “Job-hunting?” (without the subject and auxiliary verb) which are rarely seen in a formal letter or an academic article. It indicates that oral expression such as text message or online conversation has a strong casual style. It is more like conversation, and proceeds smoothly without providing much background information.

Sample Two: A Graduate Student’s Email

Hi Firstname,

I heard the request of reference letter from Dr.A at XXX University. I guess you might have received that email. Just send this as a reminder and Thanks so much for your time to do this for me:-) I have attached the ad for this position if you would need it.

I am also trying some Streptomyces lab at US, although I haven't heard any back yet including Dr. B. After browsing her papers, I am not sure about what is the main focus in her lab (regulation of thaxtomin A, secretion pathway in S.scabies). Maybe my email was not specific and professional enough so she didn't reply or she is not taking any student at this timing. Do you have any suggestion about that?

Thanks,

Student

In this email, all the sentences are complete. There is a salutation, body, closing and sign off, which are essential parts for a formal letter, but not for a text message or an on-line conversation. However, the marks of oral language are still evident in this email as compared to a formal letter, such as the use of “Hi” as an addressing and “Thanks” as a closing. Another feature is that the writer used punctuation to show her facial expression (☺). The evidence demonstrated above shows that emails have hybrid characteristics that contain both oral and written expressions.

The widespread use of emails also raises many controversial issues. Writers sometimes feel freer to write emails that show their strong personal styles which would not be expressed in writing formal standard texts (Adam, 2002; Jonsson, 1998; Naughton, 1999; Rice, 1995; Stephens, 2009). This personal adaptation of language and form, when it is presented without adequate contextual clues and semantic

interpretation, can cause confusion and misunderstanding for the recipients. Crystal (2001) suggests that email actually is a text-based communication and easy to copy, forward and attach. It is, however, almost impossible to retrieve them after they are released. Also, they may be used irresponsibly without a sender's permission.

2.2 Email as a Genre

In a broad sense, genre is a French word and is defined as “kind” or “sort”. It is the term for any category of literature or other forms of art or entertainment, for example, music, whether written or spoken, audial or visual, based on some set of stylistic criteria (Wikipedia, 2014). Genres are formed by conventions that change over time as new genres are invented and the uses of old ones are discontinued. Hammond and Derewianda (2001) thought that “genre” refers not only to types of literary texts but also to the predictable and recurring patterns of everyday, academic and literary texts occurring within a particular culture. In other words, genre is an agreement between writers and readers. For example, a detective or murder novel, generally speaking, follows a pattern: a murder scene, the mystery around the death, the process of investigating the case, and finally the crime breaking. Readers would feel confused and betrayed if this mode is broken. Since email has become a genre between conversational texts and formal letters, it also has a unique pattern for writers to follow. Likewise, the violation of its writing steps also causes misunderstanding between senders and recipients.

Ho (2011) developed a fifteen-move generic structure (see Table 1) to analyze request emails from seven Chinese English language teachers (CELT), sixteen native speakers of English (NSE), and thirty information technology professionals (ITP). He defined “move” as “units of the discourse (phrases, clauses, clause complexes and paragraphs) which perform a particular rhetorical function, such as the making of a request, the attempt to convince, and the sharing of personal experience or feeling.”(p.306) Ho’s study focused on establishing a positive rapport in the work place, and the email communication he investigated was between the three status-equal groups. He developed a fifteen-move model to show the genre steps in request emails. Not all the moves are relevant to emails outside the workplace.

Table 1: Moves in Business Request Emails

<i>1. Addressing</i>	<i>2. Acknowledging</i>	<i>3. Responding to Earlier Email</i>
<i>4. Providing Background Information</i>	<i>5. Requesting</i>	<i>6. Elaborating</i>
<i>7. Convincing</i>	<i>8. Sharing Personal Experience</i>	<i>9. Expressing Feelings/Ideas/Emotion/Wishes</i>
<i>10. Attending to Recipients’ Situation</i>	<i>11. Showing Appreciation</i>	<i>12. Showing Gratitude for Requested Help</i>

<i>13.Closing</i>	<i>14.Signing Off</i>	<i>15.Leaving</i> <i>Contact</i> <i>Information</i>
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(Ho, 2011, p. 311-312)

Baugh (2011) developed a teachable move structure for students to write requests in academic emails. She created a corpus by collecting eighty emails sent by twenty-three university students (including undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students) of the Department of Language and Linguistics. Then she coded the corpus based on Ho's genre theory. After coding the corpus, she asked the twenty-five instructors to assess the emails to create a norm or standard request email. In section three she interviewed another nine professors in the same department and all the students who submitted their emails to verify the norm. The result indicated that *Addressing* and *Closing* are moves that are highly essential in an email. *Providing background information* before the *request* was also important, especially when the senders and recipients were talking about a complicated topic. Moreover, requests made by students should be actionable and clear. A moderate and proper justification is also an effective way to support a complex request. The interview analysis in the Baugh (2011) study showed that professors are highly tolerant of students' linguistic mistakes. However, they gave low marks to emails with repetitive moves. In the end, Baugh revised the Ho's model and created a nine-move writing process which is more practical in academic context (see below).

1. Addressing (ADR)
2. Providing Background Info (PBI)
3. Request (REQ)
4. *Elaborating (ELA)*
5. *Justification (JUS)*
6. *Attending to Recipient's Status (ARS)*
7. *Closing Thanks (CLT)*
8. Closing (CLO)
9. Sign Off (SOF)

The above italicized moves are optional depending on different situations. Though they were found to be less common in the corpus, they still played an important role.

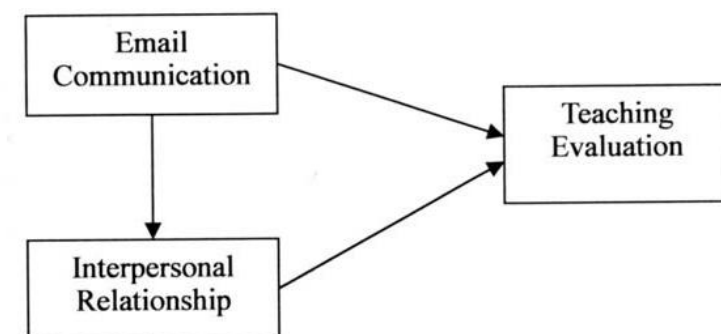
2.3 Emails in Student-Supervisor Relationships

There were four channels of communication between supervisors and their students: face-to-face, audio–video, audio-only, and written text. Social presence theory, which was first proposed by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), defines “the degree to which a person is perceived as ‘real’ in mediated communication” (Richardson & Swan, 2003, p.70). Face-to-face enjoyed the most social presence (Short, 1976) as it contains an abundance of interaction information, such as facial

expression, body movement, voice and eye contact. Though email communication belongs to the written system which is regarded as the form of communication with the least amount of social presence, it has become a popular media in higher education and provides students with a major platform to interact with their instructors (Bloch, 2002).

Sheer and Fung (2007) investigated email communication between professors and students at a Hong Kong university. Four hundred sixteen undergraduate students from various classes voluntarily took part in this study and completed questionnaires. The findings reveal that, in general, students' evaluation of supervisors' teaching is related to three factors, the extent to which supervisors' reply emails helped students, the promptness of the email feedback (two important elements of email communication), and the student-professor relationship. (Figure 3)

Figure 3: Sheer and Fung's Model



(Sheer and Fung, 2009, p.304)

Stephens, Houser and Cowan (2009) examined email communication between students and instructors to investigate the influence of casual emails written by students on the relationship between students and their instructors. In this study they define casual emails as “written more informally and included shortcuts commonly found in text messaging (i.e., “RU” for “are you”), incorrect grammar and punctuation, and openings and closings were omitted”. (p. 325). See the example below)

Subject: mting?

its me again that student who has been 2 see you 2 other times this semester i read chapter 9 and attended class but still dont understand parts of it. i didn't do well on the last exam and i think i need some help r u going 2 b in ur office this afternoon can I come by if u r

(Stephens, Houser and Cowan, 2009, p.326)

Stephens, Houser and Cowan's study contained two sections. In the first one, one hundred and fifty-two instructors who participated in the first phase of this study were randomly assigned to an experimental test. They were asked to evaluate these emails as casual or formal styles. Both student and instructor participants were asked to do an on line survey to examine their attitudes towards causal emails. The finding verified the view that overly casual emails weaken the student-instructor relationship.

Instructors were more likely to think that the students who write careless emails are less credible, thus they felt reluctant to comply with those students' email requests. In addition, the study suggested that even if the students are close to their instructors, it is still not beneficial for them to send casual emails.

As a major correspondence tool in the world, email has established a positive interpersonal relationship if both their advantages and disadvantages are better understood. Understanding email genre help students and their supervisors develop a constructive model for their relationship in educational settings.

Legg and Wilson (2009) used a quantitative approach to test the role email plays in shaping a positive relationship between professors and students. A professor of a psychology course was asked to write a welcoming email to students one week prior to the first day of school. Sixty-six students of this course were randomly assigned into two groups. A graduate assistant was responsible for sending this email to one group of students, while the other received no email. A few days after the new semester started, student participants were asked to do a psychological survey to measure their learning attitude and motivation to this course. The result showed that a positive, welcoming e-mail sent before the first day of school significantly enhanced student motivation, attitude toward the instructor, and perceptions of the course.

2.4 Politeness in Email

Politeness is a highly important factor in electronic connections between students and professors. In this un-equal status communication, students are supposed to pay more attention to their politeness especially when they make their requests. A large number of studies focused on this issue. The rationale for these studies came from Facework theory. Facework was initially developed from Goffman's (1967) concept of face (public image), which is owned and maintained by every person while they are interacting with others. Brown and Levinson (1978) further developed two types of face: negative and positive. Negative face is a person's desire for autonomy, the desire to be free from the imposition of others. Positive face was defined as a person's self-esteem and influenced by a person's desire to be liked and treated well. When asking a person to comply with a request or convey a negative comment (this is called face-threatening acts), people have to use specific politeness strategies (that is how to address the request properly) to care for the faces of others.

Many models were developed to measure politeness strategies. One of the most popular models is Blum-Kulka (1989)'s CCSARP (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project) frame. Blum-Kulka thought that in English (Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-American) culture, politeness is generally positively correlated with indirectness. Hence, the CCSARP framework emphasizes on how "speech acts", the performing of communicative acts such as questioning, promising, making a request are polite or impolite (Searle, 1969, p. 16). The CCARP was then further developed

by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007). She classified the requests based on how direct or indirect they are, and categorized the requests into three levels: direct, conventionally indirect and hint. The first level, direct request, contained seven different request strategies. There are nine request strategies in total. (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Biesenbach-Lucas' CCARP Frame

Level	Request Strategies	Examples
Direct	Imperatives	<i>Please send me an article.</i>
	Elliptic constructions	<i>Anything else?</i>
	Performatives	<i>I feel I have to ask for an extension for a week</i>
	Direct questions	<i>When do you have time?</i>
	Want statements	<i>I want to set up a meeting with you. I would like your suggestions.</i>
	Need statements	<i>I will need an extension.</i>
	Expectation statements	<i>I hope you'll give me the weekend to finish typing my work.</i>
Conventionally indirect	Query preparatory (ability, willingness, permission)	<i>Could I meet with you next Tuesday? Would you mind taking a look and giving me some suggestions?</i>
Hints	Strong hints/mild hints	<i>Attached is a draft of my grammar lesson plan. I'm having a very difficult time in figuring out how to put these lesson materials</i>

		<i>together.</i>
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(Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007, p. 67)

Based on Facework theory, Bolkan and Holmgren (2012) used a quantitative approach to investigate one hundred and twenty-five university instructors' perceptions towards students' emails with varying politeness strategies. Also, they introduced Mottet et al.'s (2006) theory that email communication has to achieve two goals: rhetorical and relational. That is, students and teachers had both rhetorical goals (to influence or achieve instrumental goals) and relational goals (to develop and maintain positive relationships), and they use email as a tool to fulfill each. In order to do this, they had to employ politeness strategies to support their requests in emails. The result of this study indicated that by adopting politeness strategies to decrease face-threatening acts in their emails to professors, students had the ability to strengthen their instructors' perspectives of themselves and, consequently, create positive images for themselves.

2.5 Studies on Chinese Students' Emails

Generally speaking, international students pay more attention to email writing because they enjoy less language resources as compared to native students (Adrian-Taylor, Noels & Tischler, 2007). At the graduate level, since the relationship between graduate students and supervisors is much closer than undergraduate students

and instructors, the students who develop a positive connection with their supervisors tend to have lower stress levels and less psychological problems (Goplerud, 1980). However, Baugh (2011) argued that a student's cultural identity is likely to interfere with the creation of pragmatically appropriate email requests when in a different culture, and "linguistic competence alone is not sufficient for communicative competence" (p. 10). Chinese students, under the influence of Confucianism, are also concerned with this, because in traditional Chinese education context teachers are highly respected by their students. Chinese students in English language universities not only have to overcome the language barrier, but also face the challenge of cultural differences. With increasing number of Chinese graduate students in Canada, there are also increasing issues around supervision. Email, as a main correspondence tool, is of great value in establishing a positive and healthy connection between students and their supervisors. Hence, this research into the experiences of how Chinese graduate students cope with these issues has practical implications.

Bjørge (2007) investigated levels of formality of international students' emails to academic staff. At the beginning of his study, he illustrated Hofstede's power distance (PD) theory (2001). According to Hofstede, PD is a degree to which "the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (p. 98). Further, people living in high PD countries accept the concept that "hierarchy means existential inequality", "power holders are entitled to privileges", "powerful people should try to look as powerful as

possible”, and “older people are respected and feared”. Hence, Bjørge assumed that students from a high PD culture are taught to respect their professors as they have privilege and authority. In these students’ emails to their professors, they tend to choose more formal greetings and complimentary closings than students from low PD countries. Bjørge used a PD scale to divide international students into high PD and low PD groups. Then he created a continuum scale to measure informal and formal expression. After analyzing international students’ emails to their professors, he found that Chinese students are more likely to use formal greeting and closings in their emails due to their high PD cultural background.

Kirkpatrick (1991, 2002) compared Chinese students’ formal letters and other written texts in English with English native speakers. He listed the characteristics of Chinese student writing and summarized them into four categories: lexis, syntax, sentence structure and discourse. Also, he investigated request letters written by Chinese students and found the writing moves following the sequence: salutation, self-introduction, reason (justification), request and sign off. The findings revealed that these students followed a traditional Chinese politeness structure by addressing their teachers by title and last name, which is different from the more informal structure of English native speakers. Additionally, Chinese students put their requests at the very end of the email while the native speakers put their requests right at the start.

Lee (2010) investigated this topic and examined Chinese students' email writing requests in an academic context. She established a corpus with six hundred emails collected between three native English speakers and three Chinese speakers of English and used the CCARP coding strategies to analyze and quantify the discourse of requests. He compared students' emails to teachers of native speakers and local English teachers (Chinese English teachers). The result showed that there was no significant difference between the requests in two groups of emails. The Chinese Learners of English (CLE) in this study tended to use direct request strategies and hints in emails to their teachers regardless of their cultural backgrounds. Analysis of the use of language and the structure of requests seem to indicate that the "CLE implicitly conform to the traditional teacher-student asymmetrical and hierarchical relationship" (p.70).

Zhu (2012) investigated the request strategies employed by Chinese non-English major (NEM) and English major (EM) students in their email writings in Chinese English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) context. He divided students' pragmatic competence into two components: pragmalinguistic competence and sociopragmatic competence. Pragmalinguistic competence, as he defined, is a "speakers' ability to infer the communicative intention of purpose of an utterance beyond the most literal meaning" (Zhu, 2012, p. 218). On the other hand, sociopragmatic competence refers to "speakers' knowledge of adapting speech act strategies to the situational or socio-cultural variables in a communicative event"

(Zhu, 2012, p.218). He used the CCARP frame work to analyze all the participants' request emails arranged from high to low imposition. Moreover, he collected syntactic and lexical modifiers to examine if the participants used adequate mitigation devices to justify their requests. The result indicated that EM students had better performance than NEM students in using requestive strategies and politeness devices to soften the request. However, the students of both groups may not have native-like pragmalinguistic competence to compose appropriate upward request emails, and neither of the two groups of EFL learners under study seemed to have acquired enough sociopragmatic competence.

While a large number of studies exist on exploring the characteristics of Chinese students' email writing in terms of culture and linguistics, there is also much research on investigating students' writing work from the perspective of professors. Santos (1988) examined one hundred and seventy-eight professors' responses to two four hundred-word writing assignments written by a Chinese and a Korean student. Over half of the professors were in the humanities or social sciences, and ninety-six were from the physical sciences. They were asked to grade the two compositions with four 10-point scales. The result showed that professors valued the content of the writing more than language. Though many vocabulary and grammar errors were found academically unacceptable in these two articles, professors thought that most of them were not irritating and comprehensible. Moreover, Santos found that the professors in

the humanities or social sciences were more tolerant in their judgments than the professors in physical sciences.

2.6 Summary

In this section the email and its characteristics were briefly outlined at the beginning to give readers a broad overview of email communication. In line with the purpose of this study, theories and previous studies about email genres and email manners were introduced in this chapter, because they are both key to e-communication and to establishing a positive relationship between students and professors. This study focuses on academic emails with requests in the context of a university. In this study, academic emails refer to the electronic communication between Chinese graduate students and supervisors. In addition to the employment of a qualitative approach to collect and analyze interview data, this study draws upon Baugh's move theory as a framework to examine the writing process of Chinese graduate students' when writing emails. Moreover, Biesenbach-Lucas's CCARP frame was used to investigate the way they made requests to supervisors.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

A basic interpretive qualitative research design was employed as the main methodology in this study. The philosophical perspective of it, as Merriam (2009) stated, is the assumption that reality is socially constructed and there is no single and observable reality. Instead, there are multiple interpretations of a single event, which needs exploring by researchers. In this chapter, the characteristics of basic interpretive qualitative research are illustrated first, followed by the sampling, data collection methods used in this study, and thereafter, the data analysis. Next, the trustworthiness and the researcher's role in this study are fully discussed. At the end of this chapter, the ethical issues and the limitation of this study are presented.

3.2 Qualitative Research

Creswell (2012) defined qualitative research as the best way “to address a research problem in which you do not know the variables and need to explore” (p.17). Also, Merriam (2009) summarized four main traits of qualitative research: a) *Focus on meaning and understanding*. She emphasized the importance of how participants construct and interpret their experience by saying “the key concern of the researcher is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspective, not the researcher's” (p.14). b) *Researcher as primary instrument*. One of the advantages of

qualitative research is that the researcher can be responsive and adaptive in terms of collecting and analyzing data. Moreover, researchers are highly efficient in obtaining key information when communicating with participants. c) *An inductive process.* Qualitative researchers establish theory from observations and intuitive understandings gathered from being in the field rather than deductively testing hypotheses in quantitative research. d) *Rich description.* Qualitative researchers rely on words to present their understandings of a phenomenon. Because of these characteristics, a qualitative approach was selected in this study to investigate Chinese graduate students' experiences of writing emails to their supervisors and the possible difficulties in their email writing that they may have.

3.3 Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research

As a major research genre, a qualitative approach has many branches such as basic interpretive qualitative research, phenomenology, ethnography, narrative research and grounded theory. In this study, a basic interpretive qualitative research design is chosen as the main methodology. The theoretical foundation of the basic interpretive qualitative research is constructionism (Merriam, 2009). The key characteristic of it is to give meaning to a phenomenon and disclose and explain these meanings. Hence, she argued a qualitative researcher conducting a basic qualitative study should focus on: a) how people interpret their experiences; b) how they construct their worlds; and c) what meaning they attribute to their experiences.

3.4 Context

Due to cultural differences and possible lack of experience when writing emails, most Chinese graduate students find it difficult to communicate with their supervisors through emails, especially when they first arrive at a Canadian university. However, email communication is increasingly being used to establish a relationship between students and professors. Any communication failure could damage the bond between students and professors thus directly affecting graduate students' study. This study aimed to investigate Chinese graduate students' experiences of email writing when communicating with supervisors.

3.5 Sampling

Rationale: Unlike a quantitative study, a qualitative study focuses on developing a deep understanding of a central phenomenon. In order to do this, “the qualitative researcher purposefully or intentionally selects individuals and sites” (Creswell, 2009, p.206). Further, researchers who employ a qualitative approach are supposed to select the participants or places that best help them understand the central phenomenon. The e-mail communication between Chinese graduate students and their supervisors can be regarded as the central phenomenon of this study. Thus, purposeful sampling was an effective method used to collect data. The standard of this sampling is to choose participants and sites with rich information (Creswell, 2012).

Two populations were identified as important in this study: 1) Chinese graduate students who communicate to their supervisors via email; and 2) supervisors who have experience of tutoring their Chinese graduate students through email. All the student participants selected are graduate students conducting research, because they have more communication with their supervisors than course-based students. The other group of participants was supervisors and native English speakers in Memorial University. Native speakers have idiomatic English and similar cultural backgrounds, which were conducive to the investigation of the general characteristics of their experiences in communicating with their students.

To further narrow down the sampling, maximal variation sampling was also used to locate the participants. Maximal variation sampling, as Creswell (2009) defined, is “a purposeful sampling strategy in which the researcher samples cases or individuals that differ on some characteristic or trait”(p. 207). Hence, factors such as gender balance, time of staying in Canada, majors and English ability were all taken into the account in this study.

In addition to maximal variation sampling, snowball sampling was adopted to solve the problem of the shortage of participants. Creswell (2012) defined snowball sampling as researchers ask participants to recommend other participants to be sampled, and he thought it was a good way to trace additional participants.

Actual sampling: Six Chinese graduate students were selected. Three majored in biology, oceanography and geology. The other three were selected from the

Faculty of Education. One male participant is from Geology; two from Education Department and three females are Oceanography, Education and Biology students. Among these students, four have been in Canada for three semesters. The other two lived in Canada for almost two years.

Two supervisors (one male and one female) who are tutoring Chinese graduate students were selected from the Faculty of Education. It should be noted that two student participants mentioned above from the Faculty of Education are both instructed by the male supervisor. The reason why this sampling was set this way is that the writing difference between the two students might be identified through their supervisor's perspective, thus providing more writing information of the two participants, and it is also a good way to verify the accuracy of the two participants' interviews and their email data. Eight participants in total took part in this study. It is a practical number considering the resources and time the researcher could afford. Since the researcher is also Chinese, this enabled open communication with the Chinese participants.

Sources of the participants: The first group of participants-Chinese graduate students-were recruited from three sources. One of the male participants (Geology) was introduced by the International Students Association (ISA) in Memorial University. The other three educational students were recruited through the ISSE (International Students' Society of Education). Two of the female participants (Oceanography and Biology) were recruited through the researcher's social

networks. Of the two supervisors, one was recruited through the researcher's networks and the other was introduced by a female participant.

3.6 Data Collection

Two data collection methods—interviews and document analysis were employed in this study.

3.6.1 Interviews

The one-on-one interview is a typical method of doing basic interpretive qualitative research. “The one-on-one interview is a data collection process in which the researcher asks questions to and records answers from only one participant in the study at a time”(Creswell, 2012, p218). This traditional method was chosen because the detailed information can be obtained from participants, and by using purposeful questions, researchers can collect detailed information.

Site and time: Sites for the interviews are supposed to make participants feel comfortable and minimize the negative environmental influence. Based on this principle, five interviews of the student participants happened at the Queen Elizabeth Library of the Memorial University. This location was chosen because it has quiet study rooms, and the interviews were not interrupted. In addition, participants were familiar with this place, and it was convenient for them. The other one interview was

conducted in a participant's home according to the participant's wishes. In terms of the two interviews of supervisors, one took place online using Skype, because the supervisor was out of town. Skype is known for its high-quality visual and audio effects in e-connection. The other interview occurred in the supervisor's office.

Three students' interviews were done in late July, and the other three were conducted in early August. One supervisor's interview was done at the end of August and the last interview happened at the beginning of September. The average time of all the interviews was thirty-eight minutes. The longest interview lasted forty-six minutes and the shortest was thirty-one minutes.

Interview process: Appointments were made before all the interviews. Emails were sent to each participant to fix the exact time and location. The consent form (See Appendix A) was also attached in the emails so that participants had enough time to become familiar with the study and their rights as participants. During the interviews, 3-5 minutes were spent talking with the participants to establish a relationship of mutual trust and respect. Then the participants and the researcher signed their names on the consent forms. Plain language was used to explain the purpose and participants' role in this study. Any terminology mentioned in the conversation was also explained to the participants to make sure the research questions were well understood. General interview techniques were employed during the interviews. While the participants were describing their experiences, brief notes were taken to record participants' facial expression, tone, emotion and action to

enhance the efficiency of the data collection. Interview data was recorded by an MP4 player and transferred to a personal computer.

As is consistent with qualitative interviewing, interview questions (See Appendix B) changed depending on the participants' response. Most of the questions in the interview were open-ended questions. Open-ended questions inspire participants to "best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researchers or past research findings" (Creswell, 2009, p.218). Some questions were followed by probing questions. This is a subquestion under each open-ended question that the researcher asks to elicit more information (Creswell, 2012). They were used especially for some participants who were confused about the initial question and did not know how to answer. The probe questions helped them narrow down the scope of their answers. For example, question ten asks the participants what were the most important and the least important aspects of writing an email. For some participants these questions may be too broad to answer. A probe question then gives participants several options such as grammar, vocabulary, structure, organization, politeness and content, and lets them rank these categories in the order of importance.

At the end of each interview, participants were thanked for their participation.

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3.6.2 Document Collection

The second set of data was in the form of collecting emails. In the interviews, participants were asked to identify emails or email threads that reflect the experiences

they described in their interviews. The importance of this email collection was explained to the participants during their interviews and they were assured that their privacy would be well protected. Also, participants were asked to select past and current emails that they deemed to be relevant to this study (Participants self-selected the emails they thought was relevant). Document analysis was used for two purposes. First, the data from the emails was analyzed comparatively with the interview data and used to verify the interview data and enhance the accuracy of the findings. Moreover, five student participants' request emails were selected to examine the genre they followed and their politeness strategies. The emails were checked respectively with Baugh's (2011) move model and the CCARP frame.

3.7 Data Analysis

Merriam (2009, p.176) stated "Data analysis is the process used to answer your research questions," In this study, data was collected mainly from two sources: interviews and documents (participants' emails). The results are drawn mainly from the analysis of the transcription of interviews. The findings, evolved from the analysis of emails, were used mainly to verify the accuracy of the interview information.

3.7.1 Interview Data Analysis

All the interview data were transcribed into text files and were printed out for the analysis. Seven steps were taken to analyze the transcription of the interviews based on Merriam's theory.

Step 1: After going through the first transcription, an attempt was made to divide the data into segments. Merriam (2009) stated, "A segment is a unit of data which is a potential answer or part of an answer to the questions you have asked in this study" (p.178).

Step 2: All the segments went through a coding process: "the process of making notations next to bits of data that strike researchers as potentially related for answering research questions" (p.178). In this process, the form of coding is called open coding. Open codes were extracted from the segments which contain the answer to this study. They are key words from the generalization of the main idea of each segment. They can either be the exact word as it appears in the segment (vivo code) or of the researchers' invention.

Step 3: Codes with similar meaning were combined into one theme or one axial code. The process of grouping open codes is called axial coding (Merriam, 2009). These open codes of first transcription were condensed into six themes or axial codes.

Step 4: All the axial codes were listed on a piece of paper, and attached to the first transcription.

Step 5: The approach was applied to the second transcription and compared to the two lists of themes. The axial codes of the two transcriptions were merged into one group of codes. Then the result was compared with the third transcription and this process was repeated until the last transcription was done.

Step 6: All the codes were aggregated together to form five main ideas. Those ideas were named and become five final themes (categories) based on student participant interview data.

Step 7: The six steps above were conducted again to analyze supervisor participants' data. Four themes emerged.

3.7.2 Emails

Meanwhile, participants' emails were examined to find out if there were any new themes. Mostly, the email data was compared with the interview data to explore the similarities and differences. On the whole, the email data supported the interview data. It also offered further information about the participants' actual writing processes and their request styles. The analysis of this small corpus reinforces and enriches this study.

3.8 Trustworthiness

Creswell (2012) offered three methods to determine the accuracy of findings in qualitative studies: triangulation, member checking and external audit. These three methods were employed to ensure the accuracy of this study to the greatest extent possible.

According to Creswell (2012) “triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection in descriptions and themes in qualitative research” (p.259). Triangulation in this study is drawn from the interview information and participants’ email writing. The interviewees’ statements of their email writing in their interviews were compared with the written emails. On the whole, the email data supported the interview data.

In addition, member-checking was used to further validate the data. Member checking is “a process in which the researchers ask one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account” (Creswell, 2012, p. 259). After each interview was transcribed, participants were asked to read the transcription and edit their statement according to what they felt was a correct representation of what they said. The data analysis could not be started until participants agreed with the transcription. Also, when the draft results of this study were finished, the participants were invited to review it again, and final changes were made to ensure validity.

In terms of the external audit, which is an approach where the researcher hires people who are outside of the study to check the study (Creswell, 2009). The researcher's supervisor consistently checked the data analysis.

3.9 The Researcher's Role

The researcher is supposed to be an instrument in the study and behaves in a way in which the participants can accept him and act naturally. In the process of data collection and analysis, the researcher used "multiple subjectivity" (use different perspectives to understand the participants).

I used to be an English teacher in a private senior high school in China. Now I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education, an email writer, and also a researcher. These experiences enable me to conduct this study from multiple roles.

I found it easy to approach Chinese participants and invite them to my study as we share the similar cultural background. My role as a Chinese graduate student helped me to develop a positive relationship with my participants. During the interviews, I listened to them patiently. Because of this role, I was able to relate to the participants and to collect valuable information. When I was analyzing the transcription and the participants' emails, I tried to be objective and responsible for the research. At that time, I was a researcher.

3.10 Ethical Consideration

When the collection of interview data was finished, information provided by each participant was verified individually. Aliases were used to protect anonymity of the participants in coding, writing, and in any future publications and presentations.

In addition, in the written email dataset, participants were encouraged to remove any information indicating a third party or use square brackets with dots or codes to omit or change names of people in their emails so these people's identities remained private. In transcribing the written emails, I further removed any identifying markers. After the email transcriptions were done, these were sent to participants. All the participants confirmed that identifying markers had been removed and anonymity assured.

Although there is the possibility that participants may know each other due to the snowball sampling, every reasonable effort was made to protect their anonymity. Participants' identities will be kept in secret and will not be identified in any publication. The data the participants presented was anonymized, pseudonyms used, and identifying information removed from the email correspondence collected.

The audio data was recorded with an MP4 player, and then transferred to a special folder in a computer. The participants' emails and the transcription were saved in the computer as well. As the research finished, all the data was transferred into a password-protected USB device. Then it was locked in a suit case with personal other belongings and was kept into a locked cabinet in researcher's office. The data folder

in the computer will later be deleted. Data will be kept for a minimum of five years, as per Memorial University policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research. Nobody, other than me and my supervisor, will have access to it. This project has been approved by Memorial University's ICEHR (Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethic in Human Research).

3.11 Limitations of this Study

Due to the subjectivity of the participants (every participant has his or her unique experience and interpretation), the result of this study cannot be generalized to all Chinese graduate students' email writing. For example, the characteristics of Chinese graduate students' writing in Memorial University may not be identical to those from other Canadian universities. Moreover, due to the limitations of the situation, this study did not adopt full-scale sampling. All the Chinese participants are second year graduate students. Thus, the findings may also not be generalized to first year students. Additionally, only two supervisors were selected. Both of them are from the Faculty of Education. Supervisors of Science or Engineering departments were not included in this study due to the failure to make contact with them. A previous study (Santos, 1988) indicated that there was a difference in the attitude between arts professors and science and engineering professors while they were reading students' emails. Hence, future research on supervisors in science and engineering departments may enrich this study.

3.12 Summary

This qualitative study adopts a basic interpretive qualitative approach as its methodology. It focuses on Chinese graduate students' experiences of writing emails to their supervisor. Eight participants were selected by using maximal variation and snowball sampling. Among these participants, six were Chinese graduate students and two were supervisors. Though supervisors' experiences of reading their Chinese students' emails were important, it played a secondary role in establishing an email writing model for the students. Thanks to the positive relationship with participants, interviews and later emails, the data collection was completed successfully. In the section on data analysis, seven steps were taken and finally five themes on student participants and four themes of supervisors emerged. Three methods, triangulation, member checking and external audit were used to ensure the validity of this study. Participants' privacy protection and anonymity have been protected as much as possible. Finally, the limitations of this study were discussed. The chapter that follows will explore the findings of this study.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter contains three sections. The first section introduces student participants' academic experiences and their backgrounds. The purpose of the second section is to report on the results of this study by presenting the evidence to support the themes summarized in the literature review chapter. Two groups of themes are explained in this part. One is from the data on Chinese graduate students and the other is from the data provided by supervisors. In the following section, student participants' writing characteristics in their emails are demonstrated by using Baugh (2011)'s move model and the CCARP's frame.

4.2 Participants' Profile

Participant one: K is a female who has lived in Canada for over three semesters. Before coming to Canada, she was an Engineering student in China and she completed her undergraduate studies in the Engineering program at a medium sized university in China. She came to Memorial to study Oceanography. Currently, she is enrolled in a Master's program in Oceanography.

K described her relationship with her supervisor as good. She indicated that her supervisor is always busy and that she only occasionally sees her supervisor. Most of the time, they communicate online through emails.

K has an English level of IELTS 6.5; this means that she has efficiency in handling complex situations and can conduct intricate conversations. K was not confident using English at first. The first time she had to write and email to her supervisor, she felt afraid to communicate. She worried about her emails after they were sent. Now she feels that she is quite good and she is no longer concerned about her emails. She said she learned from her supervisor and other professors.

Participant two: D is a sheepish boy and has been here for over three semesters. His major is Geology. His English, as he commented, is not good. He always put a great deal of thought and time into his email, though he got 6.5 in the IELTS test. I think the way he writes emails is related to his personality. He is a thoughtful, careful and modest person. As he said in the interview, he is always thinking about what his supervisor's reaction would be when he is reading his emails.

He developed a positive relationship with his supervisor. The supervisor's office is next to his, so he often has conversation with his supervisor. Before he wrote the first email to his supervisor, he learned others' email online. He also gave 6 out of 10 to his email writing when he was asked to score himself. Based on the interview with him, he is not quite confident in using English.

Participant three: L has been here for almost two years. Her undergraduate major in China was politics. She was a senior high school teacher for about eight years and her job was organizing activities for the students and teaching them Marx's philosophic

theory. Her English learning background is different from other participants. She stopped learning English after graduated from the university. She began to pick up English again one year before she went to Canada. Though she has made a huge effort, she is still weak in fundamental English.

However, her previous working experience and extrovert personality make up for this weak point. She has a very good relationship with her supervisor. Her supervisor gave her a computer screen and a printer. They always play jokes on each other. However, her supervisor used to say she is a proud girl, because she often shows very strong self-efficacy. I was interested in her oral English. As English is only a tool for communication, she cares little about grammar and vocabulary. She uses any words as long as it can be understood by her listeners.

Participant four: P is a good talker. She has been in Canada for almost two years. Her major is Biology. Chinese engineering students, generally, do not have good English skills, but she is an exception. She is quite confident in her English ability especially speaking. She is good at oral English and was ranked first place in oral English contests held by her university. Here at Memorial University, she actively takes part in volunteer jobs here. We did this interview in English and she is the only one participant who did this.

However, as I am transcribing our interview, I found a large number of grammatical mistakes in her speaking. The examination of her emails verifies my guess that she still has some problems with her basic English knowledge.

She has a positive relationship with her supervisor and was supported through the PhD admission by her supervisor. They have a mutual understanding. She said in our conversation: when the door of the office is open, that is to say she is welcome to visit her supervisor.

Participant five: Z had about 18 years of working experience as an English teacher and worked in a university in China. He did foreign affairs for his university degree and has abundant experience in communicating with people from western and African countries. In his spare time, he did translation jobs to make extra money. Z has one year study experience in the U.S. He likes traveling and talking with people.

He, undoubtedly, has quite a few friends overseas. He is an expert in getting along with people, and his modesty and amicability wins him so much popularity. This trait also can be found in his emails. He knows how to deliver his request with politic emails.

He has the same supervisor as another participant in this study. They both have a positive relationship with their supervisor H, but they use different styles to deal with people. As compared to Z, L is warmer and franker.

Participant six: J is forty-two years old. His undergraduate major is English. He went to Canada with his son to obtain his Master degree. Though he has been in Canada for only three semesters, he adapts himself quite well, because he also studied in Ireland and got to know people from western countries when he was a freshman in a university. Back in China, he was a college instructor teaching English. In addition, he also taught examination skills for IELTS as his part-time job. He is good at English writing. He is like a sponge absorbing any advice to improve his English, mostly advice from Westerners. He has been a pious follower of Jesus Christ for four years.

He enjoys his relationship with his supervisor. They play ping pong and eat together. They email quite often. Some emails are about academic topics and others are appointments for games. His supervisor did not realize his excellent writing ability until he read several J's emails. In the beginning, he thought there must be a good writer revising those emails for him.

In spite of being a good email writer, J is a man who is always searching for perfection. He spends a long time revising his writing and choosing proper words. He sets a high standard for himself and feels he is still on the way to learning English.

4.3 Themes from the Interview Data

Five categories emerged from Chinese graduate students' writing experiences when communicating with their supervisors via emails. Four themes were extracted from supervisors' experiences of reading their Chinese students' emails.

4.3.1 Themes from Data on Chinese Graduate Students

Five themes: *emotions, perceptions of supervisors, writing approaches, writing problems* and “*good*” *emails* are discussed and interpreted below. Direct quotes from the six participants have been used to provide evidence for the themes.

Emotions

In this study, emotions are defined as the mood experienced by participants while writing emails to their supervisors. This theme comes from the interview question: *What did/do you feel when you were writing an email to your supervisor?* Since writing naturally is a process of creation, a writer’s emotions are naturally affected; it is necessary to pay attention to this factor in the investigation of students’ writing experiences. Two sets of emotional responses emerged from the data: *past emotions* and *current emotions*.

a. Past Emotions

Students described their emotions when they first began writing emails to their supervisors. These have been categorized as “past emotions”. Students were anxious because they did not know the supervisor or the culture. Later they were more comfortable, because they not only knew more about the university context but also because of the way their supervisor’s reacted positively to their emails over time.

Due to the lack of experience in communicating via emails with foreign people and weak English writing skills, some participants did not know how to write an appropriate email to impress their potential supervisors. They, mostly, felt “uneasy”, “nervous” or “uncertain” when writing their first emails.

I felt a little uneasy and nervous, because it is my first time to write such a formal email. I was afraid of making grammar or vocabulary mistakes. (D)

Participant D doubted that he would be able to overcome vocabulary and grammar mistakes in his email, which would detrimentally affect the first impression of his potential supervisor.

At the beginning, I feel uneasy when I was writing to my supervisor since I knew little about him. (K)

I am quite not certain, because I do not know the person's personality. Should I keep it simple or like give the point very right away. Or should I be really polite. I feel a little bit uncertain. (P)

Participants K and P had different anxieties and worried if their email writing suited their supervisors' taste. Some participants remained highly anxious about their emails even after they sent them.

I am worried if I wrote something that annoys him (the supervisor). For example, I had been here for two days and wanted an appointment with my supervisor. After I wrote the email, I asked my boy friend to check it and give me some advice. Though I took his advice, I was still afraid that my supervisor did not reply me. (K)

The evidence above indicates that the desire to create a good first impression with a supervisor becomes a source of pressure for some Chinese students. This resulted in negative feelings such as “uneasy”, “nervous” and “uncertain”. Emotions can be regarded as a factor in affecting the participant's email writing. Since participant P was uncertain of her supervisor's personality and felt she was not good at English writing, she adopted this strategy:

To keep it in a safe way, in the first email I was really polite and proper. (P)

Of the six participants, only two, Z and J did not feel anxious while writing their first emails.

As it was my first time to write email to my supervisor, I was very careful and try to be polite, but I did not feel nervous. (Z)

I did not feel nervous and uneasy the first time. (J)

These two participants had more experience in communicating with people from English speaking countries before contacting their supervisors for the first time. Also, they were English teachers in China. Their confidence in their writing abilities made their experiences less stressful.

b. Current Emotions

This sub-category represents the participants' present feelings (at the time of the interviews) when they emailed their supervisors. The difference between past and current emotion reflects the transition of Chinese students' email experiences as they become more familiar with their supervisors and the new university context.

I thought it was pretty serious and formal when I emailed my supervisor the first time, but actually, it is not as serious as I thought. We are equal and we discuss something on an equal basis. He uses some common words. Actually, he also

makes grammar mistakes. So I do not feel I have burden on that. Then I can communicate with him in a casual way accordingly. (D)

When I was writing the first email to my supervisor, I try to be polite. I wrote “Dear professor or it is my honor” in my email. But now I did not do this. Instead, I use “Hello” directly. In the main body of my email, I do not write too much courtesy. At beginning, I felt a little bit distant with my supervisor. (Z)

The transition from strictly formal to a more casual style indicates that a closer relationship had later been established between student and his supervisor. As both parties were getting to know each other, and the student realized “*We are equal*” and he did not need to write with “*too much courtesy*” as one would do in China. Moreover, the supervisor’s writing also served as a factor to ease the students’ feelings of anxiety: “*Actually, he also makes grammar mistakes. So I do not feel I have burden on that.*” For most novice Chinese writers, the transition from past emotions to current emotions is one of decreasing anxiety to increasing comfort levels when they write emails to their supervisors.

Perceptions of Supervisors

Chinese culture emphasizes hierarchies in systems, particularly classrooms. That is, teachers play dominant role. They are highly respected and rarely challenged

by their students. From the perspective of Chinese students, a foreign supervisor is not only a stranger to them but also a person who has a powerful influence on their graduate study. They always take deferential attitudes to the professors and tend to focus on what consequences their email writing could have. This theme includes students' comments on their supervisors, and is an indication of how perceptions of hierarchy affect students' emails.

a. Imagining supervisors' potential reaction

Participants spent a great deal of time predicting their supervisors' reaction while they were writing so as to make sure their emails were "appropriate".

When he was reading my first several emails, he might think me as a fool, because my emails made at that time must have been very funny. Specifically, in those letters I wrote "I am your new student and have decided to go to your university." And then I wrote something useless. For example, "I will have more spare time in summer, so could you give some advice of what should I do."(K)

Participant K initially treated her supervisor as he would a Chinese supervisor. The way she wrote would create a good impression on a Chinese supervisor when writing an email for the first time, because the supervisor is more likely to regard "I

will have more spare time in summer, so could you give some advice of what should I do” as a way of showing respect and modesty. However, participant K did not know the Canadian context, so she worried that she would create the wrong impression for her Canadian supervisor. As she said in the interview:

Because the students here (in Canada) are more independent and learn by themselves and my supervisor may not set a high standard for me as I am only a master student. In other words, you study whenever you want. No one pushes you. (K)

Participant D confirmed this process of struggling to decipher the context and was not sure about his first email.

When I say something to a Chinese, I can predict his or her respond. Em..., I do not know how to put it. That is, I know how he answers me in my expectation. But you do not know the foreigners well, so you do not have such expectation. You are not sure if what you said offends him. That explains why I always think a lot before I write. Do you get it? I may not express myself well. Just like we are Chinese and I am talking to you, I know the way you think so I can guess what you will say next. At least, I know your reaction. So when I am communicating with the Chinese supervisor, I know he can understand me. (D)

Participants' concerns about their supervisors' reaction embodies the Chinese traditional view of a teacher-student relationship. Students think a deferential attitude would please supervisors and increase the possibility of admission. These cultural differences often cause students to feel tentative in the Canadian context, especially when they struggle to write their first emails. They were afraid that their emails might offend supervisors.

b. Students' Comments on Their Supervisor's Emails

These are comments students made on their supervisor's emails

My supervisor emailed me in time except that one time he did not. He replies me as soon as possible even though I sent him emails in the evening. I remember one time he replied me at 12pm at night. Even if he does not reply me in the evening, he sends the email back in the morning the following day. In addition, he gave me the full answers. (Z)

He answered me in time and promptly. He takes it seriously and never replies carelessly. He wrote more formal in his first several emails, but as we email each other more often, he tends to write in a freer way. (D)

In the interviews participants were asked: Are you satisfied with your supervisors' emails? All the participants gave positive answers. This indicates that, despite their anxiety the participants in this study, Chinese graduate students are content with the way supervisors' reply to their emails.

Writing Approaches

Participants attach great importance to email communication with their supervisors and use a variety of strategies to enhance the quality of their writing.

a. Writing Process

Many participants identified a writing process when they wrote emails. They followed specific steps.

Firstly, you need to know what you want to write. You must have a purpose to write an email. Think about what you want to write. As you actually write it, you start with salutation. Then name. Next, list things you want to tell. In the end, you add "All the best, regards something like that with your name". Your emails will be OK as long as you do not make any grammatical errors. (K)

Firstly, I wrote professor. If there must be a specific process, I would like to put dear before it. Then I found it is not necessary, I just put professor at the

beginning. Then I write my request and questions. In the end, I wrote “Thank you” as well as best regards something like this. That’s all. (D)

Sometimes, I wrote salutation at the beginning when I did not see my supervisor for a while such as how are you. Then I present my requests and hope to get his guidance. That is it. Finally, I put ending and check the whole email. (Z)

All the participants tended to follow the same procedure: salutation, body, and closing. The examination of participants’ emails verifies this structure. This is a simple and effective way of writing an email for them. All the participants put forward their requests in a straightforward manner rather than elaborating which is the traditional style of Chinese writing. In the body part of the email, participant K, Z and L highlighted the importance of listing main points and dividing topics into separate paragraphs. They thought this approach made a long email clear and easy to read. Moreover, participant Z thought that the final revision of the email played a vital role.

I examine my email after I finished. I focus on the articles, because when I took the 9992. My teacher told me it is a common mistake made by Chinese student. I also focus on other details. Then I check if my email expresses what I want to say, because sometimes, what you think in your mind has a little difference from what you actually write. I always spent some time doing it. I think if we are

careful enough, your writing will not be beyond the point. So I read once or twice after I wrote it. Also I want to check the grammar and my tone. And I want to check if I leave some questions. (Z)

Basically, the final revision included checking spelling and grammatical mistakes. The participants noted that many professors would not accept an email full of spelling mistakes, because this reflected badly on the student, and the professors would think that students do not take their communication with professors seriously. Also, Z made two other good points: check the weak points of the writing and make sure the email does not go beyond the original purpose.

b. Individual Styles

Participants identified that their personal writing habits and personalities have a strong influence on their emails.

My boyfriend likes short sentences. I prefer long sentences with connectors. This could be personal writing habit. (K)

Like many Chinese students, K thought the longer the sentence is, the better her English seems, but this is not the case. K's email indicated that though she used many long sentences in her emails, there were apparent vocabulary and grammatical

mistakes. Some connectors were used incorrectly. However, K felt this was the best approach for her.

Another participant said:

I use punctuation to show my mood at the end of the email. It can decrease the embarrassment and enliven the atmosphere. (D)

English native speakers also often use this approach. Email, after all, cannot compete with other connection tools such as the telephone and webvideo which provide abundant audio and visual clues. Sometimes, it is difficult to know one's facial expression and mood from emails. However, punctuations enrich the function of emails.

I remember one time I wrote an email to a professor. I did GA job for her. I left my number in my email so that she can contact me with telephone. Hence, give receivers your contact information as much as possible so they can easily contact you. (Z)

Z thought a formal email should contain the contact such as telephone numbers in the end. It would be convenient for both parties' connection.

Sentences and paragraph should be interrelated. There are three ways to tie them together. For instance, you are presenting an idea. You can use “such opinion” as a connection to keep on your argument. I use this repetition to connect sentences and paragraphs. Besides, the ending should echo the beginning. Email can be either formal or informal. When I write to my godmother, I make it extremely formal. As for the professor here, I do not need to do so. Despite of this, I still use connectors to tie up each paragraph. (J)

J is an English teacher. He stresses the formality of email writing. His writing style is close to a formal letter. The data here illustrates that participants had ideas about email writing that related to their own styles and they used this in their approach to writing.

Personality is another factor affecting participants’ approaches to writing style.

It is my personality. I am always pursuing perfection... Sometimes, when I already sent the email, I suddenly realize there was still an incorrect word in my letter. Then I sent another email to redress my mistake. (J)

J’s approach to writing emails was to set a high standard for his English writing. He not only wanted his purpose delivered clearly, but he also wanted to write as much like a native as possible. In order to do this, he often spent more time writing an email

than other participants did, even if the email was short. When he wrote, he chose his words carefully and also used any native speakers' phrasings that he had learned in his emails.

c. Learning from Others

Learning from others is the most popular and effective method used by participants to improve email writing skills. Since most of the participants do not learn English by following a regular and systematical plan, they borrow the phrasing, structure and format from the emails of their professors, classmates and friends, and use them into their emails.

I try to make my emails as brief as possible. My supervisor is an organized person. He likes listing main points in his emails. I think it's a good manner to write an email, and I start to write in that way. (K)

Participant K learned the structure of an email from her supervisors. She indicated that supervisors were always busy. A long email without clear structure probably consumes their patience and irritates them. Listing main points and numbering the topics enables supervisors to grasp a long email more easily and faster.

When I apply for different programs, I will check what the background of my potential supervisor is and check how other people will write an email. How do they write email to their supervisor? (P)

If a Chinese graduate student asks me how to write the first email to his supervisor, I will advise him to find some information on line, referring emails written by others and put his own experience in his email. This is the only way I did before and it is most effective. (D)

In China, there are no courses that teach students how to establish a relationship with foreign supervisors through emails. However, students, whether they make it successfully or not, share their experiences on internet forums. Some students collated suggestions and comments, and developed a writing format or a template (usually called *Taoci* in Chinese) for others to copy. There are a large number of versions of *Taoci* on line, with good and bad ones mixed together.

The *Taoci* (套磁 in Chinese) below is from one of the most famous websites providing overseas study information (<http://www.gter.net/>) in China. This template follows the structure: a brief self-introduction, an illustration of the target professor's field of study, how the students can help the professor, resume (attached) and a linkage to a personal website. Below is an example, taken from a Chinese website for students who want to study abroad.

About possible opportunity to study on A (research field) and related fields

Professor XX,

Hello!

I am an international applicant for ZZ PhD program at your department. I am pursuing my master's degree at YYYY University in China at present and hope to continue my study at your department.

In the past two years, I have been doing research as a research assistant in the laboratory of Professor WW, who is the My research is mainly focused on AAAA(a specific research field). My thesis topic is "TTTT". In addition, I have publications in the field of A.

As I noticed from your CV, your recent research involves PPPP. I read some of your publications in this field. As far as I am concerned, the LLLL presented in these works are really insightful. In addition, the methods you proposed to model EEEE are quite novel. The original comparison of CC and MM on their SSSS contributed significantly to the related research field.

As mentioned above, I have done some research on A, so I want to do more research in this field or other related fields in my PhD study. Pursuing my ZZ PhD degree in University of VV is one of my top choices, and working with you can definitely advance my academic career.

I am wondering if you have any plan to recruit new PhD candidate in 201 spring/fall, or do you think my background is suitable to work in your group?*

To help you know me better, herewith I enclose my CV, and one conference paper on A. If you are interested, you can also visit my personal website at:
<http://www.net.com>

I am looking forward to your reply.

Regards!

DD

YYYY University

No. 1 First Street

City, China, post code

(cell) 86-12345678910

This *Taoci* shows not only the value placed on these initial emails by Chinese students but also the complexity and detail provided in the template.

Complicating things further are contextual issues. Supervisors' personalities and students' academic backgrounds are different. While *Taoci* may be helpful in one context, they may be inappropriate in another. Moreover, students may misinterpret or misuse them. These factors make *Taoci* a controversial issue. Despite of this, *Taoci* still provides help for novice email writers.

I learn from others' emails. For instance, the ending such as sincerely, best regards or something like this. These ending may be used in different situations. I am not sure what ending should be used to my supervisor, or the people who have the same age with me. The supervisor may have another ending to his student. (L)

This is a comment from participant L when she attempted to use borrowed closings. Imitation is a good way to learn, but students with poorer English writing levels cannot judge the correct writing style and may mimic the wrong expression. Some students prefer to use "Cheers" as a closing in their emails, but in some

professors' eyes, it is too informal and not appropriate. Thus, for many participants, the question is: what standard should they follow? As participant J stated:

My writing is most affected by my godmother. She emphasizes the formality. For example, in the front of emails writes "to somebody or from someone", "Dear..." and "At the end of the email writes God bless or best regards and signature." She asked me to write the full name. I try to keep this habit. But I have not found anyone here writing emails this way. Maybe others do not like it. I used to talk about this with my supervisor. He just told me "call me W." Thus, I have to change my style as the recipient changes. (J)

Hence, he thought:

They (emails) should be what they are. I mean students are supposed to follow their professors' styles no matter what they are like. (J)

d. Politeness and Tact

Participants try to be tactful when they write request emails. They are careful to choose their words and deliberately design the structure of their emails to engineer their objectives.

When my supervisor did not reply my email, I sent him another email, writing I am thinking if my email went into your trash or I am afraid you are too busy to check your drop box, rather than ask him to verify the letter directly. (Z)

If I have an urgent request, I would not rush my supervisor directly. Instead, I tell him my schedule, in other words, the deadline of my assignment. For instance, I have to submit my paper on 20th and it would be better for me to finish it on 15th. My supervisor realized it and gave me the answer in time. However, if I say please give me a reply as soon as possible, it may be impolite. At the end of the request email, you have to show your sincere attitude by present your gratitude. (Z)

With almost twenty years working experience in China, participant Z is politic and tactful in dealing with his supervisor. He usually sent his supervisor indirect request emails rather than those with direct requests.

I always start my email with a salutation. If I know my supervisor is doing some business, I usually ask him about it at the beginning. For example, I asked my supervisor “how is your national day? or how is your holiday?” Sometimes I told my supervisor what I was doing, because some foreigners I emailed before

like to share their experience with me. I learn it from them. After this part, I bring in my request. (Z)

Z placed a short salutation before his request. The purpose of doing this was to create a friendly atmosphere so that his requests sounded more acceptable. Further, Z tried to understand his recipients' emotion to his emails, and wrote his emails deliberately to create a favorable response.

Another experienced writer J suggested that students have to learn how to negotiate when being declined by a professor.

When I was applying for a position in Ireland, I was declined by a famous scholar. Then I emailed to him again, asking him to reconsider it. As a result, he recommended me to another renowned professor. (J)

Receiving a negative response is daunting and uncomfortable; however, negotiation is a valuable strategy when students do not get what they want initially. Some participants in this study used this strategy and found if their initial request could be tempered, a compromise could be made. According to participants, sometimes, it is difficult to achieve a goal in one step, but it can be achieved in several steps.

That's actually when I first got here. I asked my supervisor would you prefer me to write your name which is Dune. She said she prefers her master students call her name. But I know many undergraduate students; my supervisor asks them to call her doctor. I think if you are not sure about what title you should use, you have to ask the person (P).

Many Canadian professors feel uncomfortable when students use their first names directly. In the early stages of a student/supervisor relationship, this informality may not be appropriate. Participant P's strategy showed negotiation since she asked her supervisor's title in the first email. The strategy allowed her to work more comfortably with her supervisor.

e. Peer Review

Peer review is an approach that is widely used by participants who are neither confident in their writing skills nor sure about how to write emails in the Canadian context. Participants usually invited their classmates, friends, roommates or English native speakers to revise their emails before they sent them. However, these sources they rely on may not always provide the controls they expected.

After I wrote the email, I asked my boyfriend to check it and give me some advice. He said the tone in the email is a bit rude and it sounds I was forcing

him to fix a time for the meeting. He said I should be more tactful, it is not proper to write the specific day of the appointment in the email to your supervisor. I am supposed to request a time if it is convenient for my supervisor. Though I took his advice, I was still afraid that my supervisor did not reply me. Later on, I knew it should not be my concern. He did not respond because he thought it was not an important thing (emailing back). If it's necessary (mostly very urgent to my project), he would definitely reply me soon. (K)

K asked her boyfriend to check her email before she sent it and took his advice, but later she realized her supervisor did not reply for other reasons not related to the tone and wording of her email. The supervisor's late reply was, then, not related to her 'supposed' rudeness as her boyfriend had suggested.

Other participants sought help from native speakers:

I asked a classmate for suggestion. He is a Canadian, and knows how to write. He told me how to write, em..., I cannot remember the detail. (D)

D thought it would be good to have a native speaker check his email, because "Chinese English users and English native speakers both know the meaning of the word literally, but the latter use it in a more proper way" (D). He, then, gave me an example:

One time I chatted with a friend. I used the word “fat” to describe a man’s figure. My friend stopped me and told me fat is an impolite word. Instead, he advised me to use big. Such is the example, Chinese may not think it matters, but native speakers have a different understanding. (D)

Chinese people develop their own meaning of a specific English word based on their culture. However, English native speakers may not use it the same way. Participant D realized this after seeing the term through a Canadian classmate’s eyes.

Not all the participants agree with peer review. Participant Z thought this approach may disclose his privacy to others. Participant J thought his writing ability was good enough to write the email appropriately and there was no need to ask for help. Other participants used this strategy during their early stages and then gradually tried to review emails on their own. Asking others to check their emails is often a way of coping with anxiety and relieving their uncertainty when they first began to write emails. As their relationship with supervisors became closer, they used this less and less.

Occasionally, I asked others to check my emails. Sometimes I did it when I prepared applications. Now I do not as I just want to convey my message. (L)

f. The Influence of Contexts

Some participants used the social circumstances as a way to judge the formality and tone of their emails. They changed their email styles based on different social contexts and recipients.

The format and the words you choose should be different towards different people. On official occasions, you have to focus more on your phrasing. But when you are writing to your friends, you do not need to care it and just write clearly. You need to let them feel close to you. In terms of my supervisor, it is a bit different from the writing to my friends. I show more respect in it. There is no fix mode of email writing. It depends on different situation. (L)

L's long-term administrative working experience made her sensitive to managing her email writing and the related interpersonal relationships. She used different phrasings and formats in her emails to suit different occasions. She believed that this approach helped her to effectively establish and maintain relationships.

Writing Problems

Whether the participants are good email writers or not, they all indicated that they had problems writing emails. These problems have been grouped into four

themes: *lack of vocabulary, native expression, difficulties with academic language/concepts and writing fluency.*

a. Lack of vocabulary

Students at the graduate level are required to know the terminology in their fields. This means knowing a large vocabulary, where words have particular meaning in context. This often places a heavy burden on many students. They feel constrained when they try to explain academic issues to their supervisors via emails. Similarly, they also have difficulty in reading their supervisors' emails.

There are so many words which have same meaning such as angle which sometimes refers to bearing. Also, movement means drifting. I could not tell these terminologies; neither did I use them well. At that time, I did not know much about these words. (K)

Participant K was troubled by so many synonyms of English. It was difficult for her to understand these professional words, let alone use them.

I do not know too many words, so it is hard for me to use accurate or proper words to deliver my idea. I feel I am restricted while using English and use the words awkwardly. For example, the word report. I feel a bit hard when I find

other words to replace it. If I used Chinese, I would have more choices for different occasions. (L)

Participant L thought that it was good to use many words to express her ideas in an email, but felt that her lack of vocabulary limited her writing. Vocabulary, as a basic unit of learning a language, is of great importance to Chinese graduate students. However, some vocabulary is specialized and it takes time to learn not only the complexity of the words but also the way the words are used in context. Participants found a lack of adequate vocabulary as something that hindered their email writing.

b. Difficulties with Academic Language/Concepts

Some participants have trouble explaining academic topics in emails. Academic language is often specific to particular disciplines. Participants mentioned that their professors found it difficult to understand what they were trying to express in their emails. The reasons are complicated. Participants may not explain adequately due to their limited English proficiency. Or their academic topics and vocabulary are so complicated and discipline-specific that their professors may not be able to decipher the meaning. Moreover, email is not a perfect communication channel and it is not as easy to overcome misunderstandings as in face-to-face communication is. For example, it would be time-consuming to explain a dynamic concept in the engineering

and science fields in an email. In this problem, several issues overlap: language proficiency, communication, lack of vocabulary and abstract academic topics.

It was difficult for me to explain something that is very abstract. I will give you an example. I had to measure two angles in an experiment. The first one I need to look around the iceberg and measure the angle from the position you face the iceberg (try to address herself clear by using gestures). Then the other one is the angle you measure from your position. This was really tough for me and took me a lot of time to write. Finally, my supervisor seemed to get it. Now I still think it is hard for me (laugh). (K)

Explaining an abstract academic issue undoubtedly needs sophisticated language skills. K tried her best to illustrate her experiment and was worried that the supervisor could not understand her. Though she said “*Finally, my supervisor seemed to get it*”, she still was not quite sure. This type of situation may cause misunderstanding between students and supervisors and anxiety for students.

When I am asking a specific issue in my thesis, he did not understand because my thesis is so long that he cannot remember every detail and context of my question. (L)

Supervisors generally have more than one student they are supervising. In addition, the process of writing a thesis is long and complicated, so they sometimes find it difficult to understand their students.

Like particular technical problems that I have is more complicated. Or sometimes maybe my email is not clear enough I think there is one or two times my supervisor just say that you probably see me instead of writing email to me. I am sure if that is my email is hard to understand. Or she might think talk face to face will be much easier. (P)

P's supervisor realized that she and her Chinese student could not settle the problem online. Then, she asked P to come to the office and have a face-to-face meeting.

c. Native expression

For most language learners, an ultimate goal is to speak and write like a native speaker. All the participants in this study have Chinglish problems (Chinglish refers to spoken or written English language that is influenced by the Chinese language) in their emails, and Chinglish is often too persistent to eradicate.

The most important thing in writing an email is making your statement understood well. Then use their (English native speakers') way to express. Now

I can express myself well, but I cannot express idiomatically, so this is the problem troubles me all the time. That is why I am interest in your study. (K)

Though K has already made progress in the email writing “*Now I can express myself well*”, but she thought she could not “*express idiomatically*”. She did not know how to improve her writing and hoped this study would shed light on her problem.

Words confuse my supervisor. You know, there is difference between Chinese and Western cultures. The words you use may sound strange to others. I cannot recall it right now (laugh). Chinese may use a word in this way, but native speakers may use it in another way. (D)

D recognizes the difference between native speakers of a language and newcomers. He cannot easily articulate the exact difference but he knows that it exists.

I still have problems in my expression. Words and grammar may confuse them. Though I am making progress, I still cannot express myself natively...The culture is another issue. Though I stayed in Ireland for a long time, I still cannot adapt myself. There is always long preparation before the real content. (J)

Though J has good writing skills, he still finds it difficult to express himself idiomatically. He and D both attribute this to cultural differences in non-native writing.

d. Writing Fluency

Fluency of writing was considered to be a challenge by participants in this study. Most participants indicated that they needed time to convert Chinese into English. They were held back by strange words, phrases or grammar while writing emails. They needed to stop to seek the help of other sources such as a dictionary. All of this affects writing fluency.

I spent too much time on thinking (organizing words and sentences). I cannot write directly what I think. While writing, I have a whole frame first and then write in detail. It looks like while your writing is going well, it is stopped occasionally by words, grammar, or something like that. Then you have to reorganize it and return to the right track. This is the main problem. (D)

D felt stressed while writing the first few emails to his supervisor as he tried to keep his phrasings as accurate as possible. He often spent long amounts of time writing a short email. Going back and forth between the dictionary and the email

interrupted his thinking and therefore decreased his writing efficiency. Writing fluency was identified by most of the participants in this study as a problem they faced.

“Good” Emails

The definition of this theme is derived from three interview questions. The first one: *what do you think a good email would be?* This question was set to explore participants’ standards of writing a perceived “good” email. Then a probe question was asked to broaden their thoughts by asking them to rank several factors in order of importance, such as vocabulary, grammar, content, organization, and politeness. The last question “*Can you evaluate your email writing?*” was to check if students were satisfied with their emails. Based on participants’ answers, this theme is divided into three subcategories: *standards of a “good email”, expectations and proficiency vs communication.*

a. Standards of a “Good” Email

Although there is no exact standard used or expressed by all the participants, their responses all have similarities.

When asked “*What is a good email like?*” K replied “*express yourself clearly*”. D stated “*use the simplest or briefest way to express your request and get the help as soon as possible*”. Z made three points “*tone should be soft, content clear, and*

format normative” Then he defined “*normative*” as “*put the sender’s contact such as telephone number or email address in the end*”. L had the similar idea with D by saying “*The expression of your viewpoint and how your purpose can be achieved*”. P also had three key points of making a good email “*The information should be correct and easy to understand*”, “*a regular format*”(for example, greeting at the beginning, appreciation in the end and place the sender name at last) and “*a brief style*.”

In terms of ranking the order, most participants reached the surprising agreement that the *content* of an email is the most important. Five students placed the *content* and *organization* at the first two places. *Vocabulary*, *politeness* and *grammar* were put at the last three places randomly. Z explained “*If you can express clearly what you want, receivers are more likely to email back even if your email does not have a soft tone or clear format. Content is the most important.*” K ranked vocabulary the last and explained “*You just need to pick the right words. If the organization is no good, you will make mess of it*”. D placed the grammar the last as he thought “*Professors know you are a foreigner and they will not be particular about it*”

Among all the participants, J has a unique viewpoint. He thought politeness, words, grammar, organization and content should be changed according to different recipients and situation which is the same as L thought. He called it “*appropriateness*” and said:

The most important thing is the appropriateness. As I mentioned before, I write formal email to my godmother. However, I write casual emails to my classmates. When it comes to my supervisor, I keep it in between. At least, we should keep our email accurate and smooth. After all, we are students in academic field. In other words, keep the word and grammar accurate. (J)

Then he had two separate ranking systems

Maybe my order is different from others. Because I can convey what I think, I put content on the last place. Appropriateness first. I also have another order; the first is content, second language and last is appropriateness. The appropriateness is not necessary. We write mostly to professors. Hence, we have uniform style and do not need to think too much on it. (J)

J thought students without good writing ability should focus on the content of their emails and try to be clear and fluent; however, a good writer who can achieve this goal switches their attention to other aspects such as “*express appropriately.*”

b. Motivations

Some participants realized they still need to improve their email writing and feel it necessary to learn anything that will help them write a good email, for example, job-searching or to enhance the communication with their professors.

I am going to find a job; it would be helpful if there is a course teaching me how to write the email related to job hunting. (D)

I need some modes so that I can follow them at the beginning. Then I can create something on my own and write freely. Those modes should fit different receivers. For example, the mode for students writing to professors, the mode for the communication between colleagues, business emails, the email communication crossing cultures, the communication between classmates with academic issues, communication between close friends and family members.(L)

The two participants both mentioned one issue: how to write an appropriate email to manage different situations. Emails can be either formal or informal and it depends on senders and recipients.

c. Proficiency vs Communication

The analysis of email writing contains two dimensions, the language proficiency of an email and email as a tool of communication. Further, an email with words and grammatical mistakes may not be correct based on the standard of language proficiency, but it can successfully convey a sender's idea, thus achieving the goal of communication. On the other hand, while there may be vocabulary and grammatical problems in an email, it may still be unacceptable (for example, writing a 'flaming' (angry) email or an email does not answer the request of the sender), and thus it fails to fulfill the role of communication.

I do not quite understand your meaning. From what aspect do I evaluate my email? I mean I can use email to fulfill its function as a communication channel or my writing ability? (L)

Participant L contributed a valuable point here. When asked "could you give yourself a mark on your email writing?" she made the answer above. Then she gave herself eight (out of ten), because she said "*my English is not good, but I can express myself well. (L)*" In sum, email contains both language proficiency and communication, and students have to balance both of these. Some participants in this study who do not have solid language proficiency skills in their writing choose to keep

the focus on communication. This is a further approach to email writing experienced by participants in this study.

4.3.2 Themes from Data on Supervisors

Two professors were invited to participate in this study. The themes that emerged about how they read the emails they receive from Chinese graduates are similar to those of the graduate students. Four themes were extracted from the interview data: *traits of Chinese students' emails, perceptions of "good emails", supervisors' recommended writing strategies, and emails as a teaching tool.*

Traits of Chinese Students' Emails

Based on the past and current reading experiences, the two supervisors both thought Chinese students showed deferential and modest attitudes in their email writings. They commented that Chinese students were fast learners and made good use of others' emails to improve their writing skills.

a. Deferential attitude

Although the two supervisors both recognized Chinese students wrote emails that contained politeness and respect, they differed in their perspective of this style.

So my experience with Chinese students is one that as my friend of the University of Winsor said on our conference last year, one of my former graduate students who is the associate dean of the university said one of the difficulty of Chinese students is that they treat us professors too much deference. That is, they need to question more openly what we were saying sometimes. (D)

If anything I really enjoy their emails because they tend to be very extremely polite and gracious and I really like reading them. (A)

A enjoys reading Chinese students' emails and appreciates their manners. D felt students have to learn how to voice their own opinions through emails. Canadian professors want to see students showing their individual ideas, because it means that they are involved in class actively and really thinking. However, in a traditional Chinese class, students are supposed to accept the authority, the teacher. Any question or challenge to the teacher means disrespect.

b. Learning from Others

The two participants both thought Chinese students were able to learn quickly. They quickly learned how to write emails by reading other emails. For example, they borrowed expression in the emails they read to improve their own writing.

I can see that they (Chinese students) try picking up the style native speakers use in the emails. She (one of the students) used cheers in her emails. I would not say cheers, but I found a lot of English speakers use it in their emails. I think she may get it in others' emails and started to use it. (A)

A's finding verifies this approach that Chinese students talked about in the interviews. In the beginning, her Chinese student did not use "Cheers" as a closing. After several emails, this student began to use it. This indicates that the student is watching, noticing and mimicking email language and structures.

c. Misuse articles and gender pronouns

The two supervisors found that most Chinese students have problems with the misuse of articles and gender pronouns due to the language differences between Chinese and English.

I know it is a mistake, but I think to myself "why is it a mistake?" You know, because it is really quite subtle. So that are the two things that Chinese students typically do. Gender pronouns and articles. Like the word "他(她)", because you do not have gender pronoun, even their English is extremely good, they still occasionally make the mistake. And the same with the article. (A)

Actually, there is a difference between gender pronouns in Chinese. “他” means he and “她” refers to “she”. Though both Chinese characters are different in appearance, they have the same pronunciation. This could be the reason why Chinese students make mistakes with he and she. In terms of articles, there are also corresponding Chinese characters, but “the” is used in a more flexible and complicated way in English.

Perceptions of “Good Emails”

The theme comes from the question: *What do you think a good email is like?* This was a question to explore supervisors’ perceptions of “good” emails. The two participants’ answers were summarized as four subcategories to illustrate the “good” emails.

a. Clear and brief

The two supervisors indicated that emails sent by students should be easy to read, and should deliver a request directly rather than express it in a roundabout way or say something that is not relevant to the purpose of the email. In addition, students should try to keep the email as brief as possible.

I make sure that whatever the message I am trying to relay that I write that clearly and that is clearly understood by the person receiving the message, because the purpose of the email is to communicate. So whatever the message is, you have to make sure that is clearly communicated. And I try not to write to waste people's time unneeded emails. I write emails when they needed to be written not necessarily. (D)

I think that is carefully worded and clear, also not too long trying to be succinct, because people do get a lot of emails. (A)

b. Politeness

Two participants thought politeness was very important in an email. They would accept an unclear and ambiguous email. (When students sent them such emails, they would write and ask the students for clarity. They kept on sending queries until they understood the student.) However, they would not accept a rude email.

I do think politeness is very important. I may rank it on the top actually, because if the person being really polite, I would be more likely upset about it even if he made vocabulary and grammar mistakes (A)

It (the email) has to be one that when it goes into public domain which email can do it has a degree of ethics with it that you are not assassinating someone's personality or character. (D)

What is a rude email? It depends on individual preference. However, generally speaking, an email without a salutation and closing, or one with too many informal abbreviations, slangs and spelling mistakes would be considered rude. An email with a request, if it does not have adequate hedging and modifiers, sounds more like a directive. For example, A said:

I remember an international student who worked for me but he is not a Chinese student. His English is very good and he is from a very different culture. He does email me "Hey, prof." in his email. And I think "What!" (A)

c. Multiple standards

The two supervisors used different standards to judge students' emails. Based on the interview data, these standards depended on the students' English proficiency, and the student/supervisor relationship.

It depends who's writing the message and how fluent they are in English. So if it is a Chinese student is writing to me and who is new to English. For example,

one of my graduate students when she came to me, she could hardly say what is the weather like today? Her spoken English is very very challenged. So my expectation of her understanding of our communication initially was one of developments. (D)

D knew this student had poor writing skills and was from a different cultural background, so he was more tolerant and waited to see her make progress.

He bothered me a little when he wrote "Hey prof". So do you know what I mean? It depends on specific cases. So even if I have an example of an email, it would not tell me too much about this person and where he is from. I would wonder why he writes in this way. But I have already known this person. He did wonderful work for me. So I just forgive him. (A)

Though this student used an over-casual style in his email, he did a satisfying job for A. Given this, A excused him and accepted his email. If a student has a close relationship with the supervisor, it seems that the supervisor is more tolerant towards his or her emails

Supervisors' Recommended Writing Strategies

Supervisors' recommended strategies are similar to the approaches used by student participants, including listing main points, proof reading and asking the professor's title in advance. Moreover, both the supervisor participants suggested that students should control their emotions, particularly anger, and cautioned that students should avoid writing "flaming" (angry) emails.

The flaming email, as D defined:

It is an expression that you use in North America when you are very angry and you want to respond something because email as a media you can write respond which is very unkind aggressive or angry. You hit the send button, and it's gone. So you sent a flaming email and you cannot take it back. (D)

A flaming email causes damage to interpersonal relationships. Once it is sent, it cannot be taken back. Participant A accordingly offered advice on how to avoid such emails:

I try to be very careful to be polite in case somebody misinterprets or gets upset about it. Also, if I feel upset about something, I usually wait at least 24 hours before I send them. I have to make sure I am not sending an angry email back. (A)

Emails as a teaching tool

For participant D, email is not only a communication tool, but also can be regarded as a teaching stage for him to improve his Chinese students' English.

One of the things that I used emails for my students, particular for my Chinese students to model for them how to write linguistically proficient messages. So when the students send me a message that has language misuse, I will in a very friendly way say in English we would usually say what you were saying this way. Or we would place this modifier here. And then my students sent next time will make that correction. (D)

D thought the email could be used as a teaching tool. He gave his Chinese students advice on how to improve their writing, and expected them to make progress. He really enjoyed seeing his students' growth.

I found my Chinese students when I correct the difficulties it is modified the next time. They learn more quickly. I think that probable two things one hard work ethics and second thing is that my full time students are most Chinese students....So how I treat students is dependent on how long they have been here how good their language development is. My expectation is their growth.

4.4 The Analysis of Students' Request Emails

Five email samples were selected from Chinese students' emails and were examined with Baugh's (2011) theory and the CCARP's frame.

4.4.1 The Analysis of Students' Email Moves

In order to understand this part, a brief introduction to Baugh's moves is presented in advance.

The Baugh model contains nine moves: (the italicized moves are optional in a request email)

1. Addressing (ADR): A greeting or title for the recipients
2. Providing Background Info (PBI): Provide information related to the request so that the recipients can understand the request well
3. Request (REQ): Ask for something
4. *Elaborating (ELA)*: Give additional qualifying info about request. For example, I'd just like to ask you a few questions about my assignment (following request for meeting).
5. *Justification (JUS)*: Give reasons to support the request

6. *Attending to Recipient's Status (ARS)*: Show understanding of professors' situation (often achieved by an apology). For example, I am sorry to bother you.

7. *Closing Thanks (CLT)*: Show gratitude or end message. For example, thank you in advance

8. Closing (CLO): End email. For example, best wishes or sincerely yours

9. Sign Off (SOF): senders sign their names

Baugh also summed up the other five optional moves in an email.

1. Acknowledging (ACK): Thank teacher for what they have done

2. Referencing Earlier Communication (REC): Refer to previous emails, conversation or meeting. For example, in our last meeting, you told me...

3. Providing Progress Info (PBI): Show the progress students' made. For example, I have been searching the literature you suggested...

4. Phatic Relational (PHR): Attend to relationship with teacher. It is often realized through enquiring about health, holidays. For example, how are you? Or how is your holiday?

5. Sharing Personal Info (SPI): Explain student's feelings, personal situation

The analysis is as follow: the abbreviation of each move was used to mark the emails.

The underlined sentences are students' requests.

Email 1

Dear Professor *Lastname*: (ADR)

I am very sorry to bother you and send this e-mail (ARS), but I really wish to contact you. My name is X. I am a postgraduate student doing *name of the field* in the College of Energy Resources, XXXX University, P. R. China. I wish to apply a MSc. Degree in Geology at your university. My desired date of entrance is Fall, 2013. (PBI)Thank you very much to read this mail. (ACK)

I have achieved my degree of B.Eng. (Resources Exploration Engineering) in Jun, 2011. And my graduate thesis Research on the Reservoir Characteristics of the Chang 8₁ Formation in Zhenjing Oilfield, Ordos Basin won the excellent undergraduate course gradation design. Then, I was recommended for admission to be a postgraduate without exam in Mineral Survey & Exploration major, which is one of the nation keystone disciplines, in the same university, in Sep. 2011, especially in Reservoir Geology and Reservoir Geochemistry. I have the experiences of research works on the topic of clastic reservoirs and acquire such skills, as core observation, thin-section analysis via EMS, and cathodoluminescence, etc.(PBI)

I found your information on the website of the Department of Earth Sciences, and I noticed that your research focuses on carbonate reservoirs. I have a strong interest in this area. I hope my solid background in reservoir geology can meet you general requirement of entrance to the Department of Earth Sciences. *(JUS)* I wonder if you would take any student next fall 2013, and I hope you could give me more information about your program. (REQ) and *(ELA)* I am looking forward to your warmhearted reply.

Thanks! *(CLT)*

Yours Sincerely (CLO)

D (SOF)

Email 2

Dear prof. *lastname*, (ADR)

How have you been recently? I hope everything is going well with you. (PHR)

T has informed me of the graduate assistantship. I will be Dr. *H'* s assistant for this semester. Hopefully we can meet next week to start my work. (REC) Thanks for your reminder. (ACK)

I borrowed the book XXX -you mentioned last semester. (PBI) However, the contents are quite different from the version of 2008, and 2012. There are quite a lot of additions to the 2001 version. But the late versions are not available in the library.

(JUS) Do you still have the 2008 version? If so, can I borrow it? (REQ)

Hope you stay warm in the crazy weather. (PHR)

Best, (CLO)

Z (SOF)

Email 3

Hello Dr. *Last name* (ADR)

Attached is the document which A reorganized for me.

He made the logic better and it can be a direction for me. (PPI)

However, I am still thinking about my research questions:

Quesion1

Question2

Question3 (PBI)

I like these questions, but I did a lot of work about literature review on... (JUS),
How should I link them? the most important, how should like the tables or questionnaires with my research questions? (REQ)

Best Regards, (CLO)

L (SOF)

Email 4

Hi Brad, (ADR)

Now I'm considering only use the pictures of iceberg to build 3D models, and I've found a method which is theoretically possible to do that, but I'm not sure how accurate it can be. To be more accurate, laser scanner or other devices are still needed. (PPI)

For now (only using photographs), I need to calculate the distance between iceberg and the point taken photographs.(PBI) GPS may probably works, but I'm wondering if there's other devices available to measure the distance so that I can get a better result or compare two methods to verify if the result is reliable enough. (JUS)

Please let me know if you have any information about that. (REQ) If so, I can do some tests first. (ELA)

Thanks, (CLT)

K (SOF)

Email 5

Hi Dawn, (ADR)

I heard the request of reference letter from Dr. Rosie Bradshaw at Massey University. I guess you might have received that email. Just send this as a reminder (REC) and Thanks so much for your time to do this for me :-) (ACK) I have attached the ad for this position if you would need it. (REC)

I am also trying some Streptomyces lab at US, although I haven't heard any back yet including Dr. Rosemary Loria. (PBI) After browsing her papers, I am not sure about what is the main focus in her lab (regulation of thaxtomin A, secretion pathway in *S.scabies*). Maybe my email was not specific and professional enough so she didn't reply or she is not taking any student at this timing. (JUS) Do you have any suggestion about that? (REQ)

Thanks, (CLT)

P (SOF)

4.4.2 The Analysis of Requests in Students' Emails

All the requests were excerpted from the email samples with participants' names and each request was categorized based on Biesenbach-Lucas' CCARP frame. (Table 2, p.20)

1. D: I wonder if you would take any student next fall 2013, (*Conventionally Indirect*)
and I hope you could give me more information about your program. (*Direct: Expectation Statement*)

Will you be in your office today? (*Direct: Direct questions*)

Could you kindly help me to install Iqpet? (*Conventionally Indirect*)

I have already received the reply from Ms. XX, but she says they do not assess applicant's transcripts for fellowship eligibility unless requested to do so by the professor. (*Hint*)

Is this one? (*Direct: Elliptic constructions*)

2. Z: Do you still have the 2008 version? (*Direct: Direct questions*)

If so, can I borrow it? (*Conventionally Indirect*)

Which do you think more helpful to my future learning? (*Direct: Direct questions*)

I hope to get your suggestion. (*Direct: Expectation Statement*)

I cherish the study opportunity at MUN very much, and hope you give me some advice to the above two possible cases to help make my dream become true. (*Direct: Expectation Statement*)

Unfortunately, your course Educational Finance is not in the course list. Will it be offered for the spring semester? (*Direct: Direct questions*)

3. L: How should I link them? The most important, how should like the tables or questionnaires with my research questions? (*Direct: Direct questions*)

Attached is the research questions and hypotheses which I put some links with questions of questionnaires. Would you like to have a look? (*Conventionally Indirect*)

Do you think I need a conclusion for my findings in Chapter 4? Or I just address them at the beginning of Chapter 5? (*Conventionally Indirect*)

4. K: Please let me know if you have any information about that. (*Direct: Imperatives*)

I'm looking forward to hear your suggestions on my current work and which part should I focus next step. (*Direct: Expectation Statement*)

Please advice. (*Direct: Imperatives*)

5. P: Do you have any suggestion about that? (*Direct: Direct questions*)

I would like to change my research direction to the studies of antibiotics produced by *Streptomyces* spp. (*Direct: Want statements*)

Therefore, I am wondering if there is any funding opportunity in your lab during 2014-2015. (*Conventionally Indirect*)

I would like to pursue another master degree but for chemistry if that would be a good start. (*Direct: Want statements*)

But I might need some help running them as I haven't tried the pre-running steps by myself. (*Direct: Need statements*)

Table 3: The Frequency of Different Requests

Level	Request Strategies	D(4)	Z(3)	L(4)	K(3)	P(3)
Direct	Imperatives				● ●	
	Elliptic constructions	●				
	Performatives					
	Direct questions	●	● ● ●	●		●
	Want statements					● ●
	Need statements					●
	Expectation statements	●	● ●		●	
Conventionally indirect	Query preparatory (ability, willingness, permission)	● ●	●	● ●		●
Hints	Strong hints/mild hints	●				

To sum up, this chapter includes two sections: the demonstration of themes on interview data and the analysis of student participants' emails based on the Baugh and CCARP model. Students and supervisors' interview data were generalized into two groups of themes. They are *emotion*, *perceptions of supervisors*, *writing approaches*, *writing problems* and *"good" emails* in the first group. In terms of the themes of supervisors, they are *traits of Chinese students' emails*, *perceptions of "good" emails*, *supervisors' recommended writing strategies* and *email as a teaching tool*. In section two, the document analysis of Chinese students' emails verify the interview data and previous studies mentioned in the literature review part. Further analysis is presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate Chinese graduate research students' experiences of email writing to their supervisors, thus providing them with advice to improve their email writing and promoting a positive relationship with their supervisors. The questions of this study are listed as follows:

1. What are Chinese graduate students' experiences in their email communication with supervisors?
2. What are the supervisors' experiences in their email communication with Chinese graduate students?
3. What are the commonalities and differences in their views of their experiences?

There were six student participants and two supervisor participants taking part in this study. Their experiences were coded into five and four themes respectively in two groups by using a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Those themes are combined with the analysis of student participants' emails to answer my research questions. Recommendations for Chinese graduate students' email writings are offered at the end of this chapter.

5.2 Answers to the Research Questions

Question 1: What are Chinese graduate students' experiences in their email communication with supervisors?

Answers from interview data

Five themes emerged from students' interview data. They were *emotions*, *perceptions of supervisors*, *writing approaches*, *writing problems* and *“good” emails*. They depict a vivid picture of these participants' writing processes and their mental experiences.

Theme One: Emotions

Most student participants experienced the transition of their feelings when writing emails to their supervisor. They felt stressed, uneasy and uncertain when they first wrote to professors, because they were not confident in their English ability, and had little experience of communicating with a foreign professor. Two characteristics of their emails were identified in the initial stage. They had an overly deferential attitude (wrote with too much courtesy) and followed a similar pattern (*Taoci*) when wrote the first request email for admission. However, as they became used to writing emails in English and were able to establish a stable relationship with their supervisors, they began to relax. Though they still made vocabulary, grammatical and Chinglish mistakes, they regarded email as a positive communication tool rather than

a test of their English writing skills. As it was mentioned in the last chapter, for most novice Chinese writers, the transition from past emotions to current emotions is one of decreasing anxiety to increasing comfort levels when they write emails to their supervisors.

Theme Two: Perception of Supervisors

This theme reflects the big difference in the teacher-student relationship between Chinese students and western students. In a traditional Chinese classroom, students try to create a “good boy or good girl” image. That is, they listen to teachers and follow them blindly even if they are wrong. Almost no one dares to challenge their teacher in class. This finding supports Bjørge’s (2007) study. As she found, students from a high PD culture are taught to respect their professors as they have privilege and authority. Therefore, they are highly concerned about what the teacher thought about them through emails. The interview data indicated that all the participants in this study cared about establishing and maintaining a positive impression with their supervisors, and they always wondered what their supervisors’ reactions were while reading their emails. Hence, participants tended to try to predict their supervisors’ reaction by deciphering the western context (though it was hard for them), and to ensure an “appropriate” email was written. On the other hand, students evaluated their supervisors’ teaching via the emails. For example, one participant thought that the native professor may not be as diligent as Chinese professors, because

her boyfriend's Chinese supervisor replied faster and even emailed him outside of work hours. Sheer and Fung (2009) also found that email communication affected the students' evaluation of their instructors.

Theme Three: Writing Approaches

This theme includes six subcategories: *writing process*, *individual styles*, *learning from others*, *politeness and tact*, *peer review* and *influence of contexts*. Chinese graduate students use various strategies to promote the quality of their emails. The interview information reveals that all the participants have a similar writing process and that they place their request at the end of emails. Kirkpatrick (1991, 2002) had the same finding after he compared the sequence of Chinese students and native English speakers' writing. Moreover, Chinese students realized the importance of the briefness in an email. Some of them suggested that listing points would be a good strategy when they talked about a complicated topic with professors through emails. Though participants have similar writing processes, they have different personal styles while writing emails. Some participants liked using long sentences, some liked adding more connectors to make the email more logical, and others preferred to add contact details at the end. Participants were active learners. They borrowed phrasings and expressions from native speakers' emails. In their request emails for admission, they relied on a template (called *Taoci*) from an online site to create a positive impression and attract the attention of their potential supervisors. Two participants with working

experience were especially resourceful. In order to avoid “face threatening acts” one made his requests carefully and used an indirect way to ask his supervisors for something. The other was good at negotiating with his supervisor to obtain what he wanted. Some participants thought suggestions from native speakers would be helpful to their email writing, but later on they did not think it necessary because they found they could write their emails without the help. Additionally, two participants emphasized the importance of context and stated that emails should cater to different recipients. This finding shows that as students get used to using emails, they gradually realized that changes should be made in their emails to deal with different recipients and occasions. This shows a growing sophistication in understanding language and context.

Theme Four: Writing Problems

Though Chinese graduate students spent almost ten years learning English in China to reach the language requirement of the university, they still suffer from problems such as a lack of vocabulary, poor grammar, Chinglish, bad writing habits and the difficulty of explaining abstract academic issues. The lack of enough words in an academic field and the weak grammar made them feel stressful when they were reading and creating emails. Sometimes it caused awkward situations when students were discussing an abstract academic topic with supervisors. Even though they tried hard to explain the academic issue, the professors did not understand them. Chinese

students are often not efficient writers, because many of them often spend much more time writing the email than the English native students. Their writing is often disrupted by a strange word or an expression. Among all the problems, most participants even the two English supervisor participants, thought that a major problem was that students cannot express themselves as English natives did. Writing is the most difficult part of learning a language. Unfortunately, most of the participants do not have a systematic leaning plan to improve their writing. They do, however, employ strategies to aid them.

Theme Five: “Good” Emails

When asked about the standard of writing a good email, participants’ responses were different, but their answers had similarities. Most of them agreed that the content of an email should be the most important factor. As for a request email, the request should be justifiable and actionable, so supervisors read it without misunderstanding. They also ranked organization in the second place as they thought it would be convenient for the professors to read an email with a clear structure. Though all participants thought politeness was an important element, none listed it as the top item. It should be noted that one participant used a different way to evaluate a “good” email. She divided email writing into two dimensions: language proficiency and communication. According to this evaluation system, she gave her email nine points (out of 10), because her email fulfilled the function of communication. Mottet,

Frymier, and Beebe (2006) had a similar idea and named it as rhetorical/relational goal theory. They thought that students and teachers in classroom activities both want to achieve two goals through language communication: influence or achieve instrumental goals (rhetorical goal), for example, the achievement of a teaching goal and developing and maintaining positive relationships (relational goal).

Answers from the document analysis of participants' emails

The email samples were analyzed with Baugh's (2011) move model and CCARP's frame. The five emails all contain at least five basic moves: *Addressing*, *Providing Basic Information*, *Request*, *Closing* and *Sign off*, but these moves were sometimes presented in a different order. All the participants made their requests at the end of the emails, behind the justification or reasoning (Kirkpatrick, 2002). This sequence could be a disadvantage as it may not quite match the way native speakers' read. When a professor is reading a long email with a complicated topic, the professor may not know the purpose until he gets to the end of the email. It may consume the professor's patience and confuse him particularly if he is busy. Moreover, Baugh suggested that moves like *Acknowledging (ACK)*, *Referencing Earlier Communication (REC)*, *Providing Progress Info (PBI)*, *Phatic Relational (PHR)* and *Sharing Personal Info (SPI)* made a request email redundant. The examination of the five email samples indicated that four emails all contain these steps and each one has at least one. Most of

the participants told supervisors about the progress they made as they would like to create a diligent and efficient impression with their supervisors.

It should be noted that in electronic communication supervisors have strong influence on participants' writing styles. Three participants announced that they copy their supervisors' expressions in their emails. The examination of one student's email thread with his supervisor also supports this finding. For instance, participant D stated that he developed a casual writing style, because his supervisor always uses abbreviation and incorrect grammars in the emails to him. Participant Z placed his personal contact at the left corner of his email from copying his supervisor's habit of doing this. The traditional Chinese student-teacher relationship may be one reason for this, because Chinese students often mimic their teachers. Besides, students with low language proficiency also tend to imitate native speaker's phrasings.

Chinese students in this study may not have developed a deep understanding of how to use different request strategies. As Table three indicates, Chinese students prefer using direct requests to indirect requests, and hints. This frequency was verified by the previous studies (Chang & Hsu, 1998; Lee, 2010; Zhu, 2012). It shows that Chinese students have no clear preference for request strategies. Further, Chinese students try to be polite in their emails, but they often do not know how to use an appropriate way to show their manners, because conventionally indirect requests and hints require more complicated grammar and words. Moreover, direct requests such as want statements (I want to...) and expectation statement (I hope you...) are acceptable

in communication in the Chinese context. The students in this study were not able to recognize that there was something wrong with the way they make requests.

Question Two: What were the supervisors' experiences in their email communication with Chinese graduate students?

Four themes emerged from supervisors' interview data. They are *traits of Chinese students' emails, perceptions of "good" emails, supervisors' recommended writing strategies and emails as a teaching tool.*

Theme One: Traits of Chinese Students' Emails

Two major characteristics emerged from the interview data: *deferential attitude* and *learning from others*. Though the two supervisor participants both agree that Chinese students have good manners in their emails, one of them interpreted politeness as "deferential" which, he thought, may be a disadvantage for Chinese students, because in Canadian culture students are supposed to think independently and be critical rather than agree with their teacher through the whole class. In contrast, the other participant appreciated the politeness in the emails. Both participants thought Chinese students were good learners and they use the phrasing and expressions from other emails. This finding verified student participants' interview data.

Theme Two: Perceptions of “Good” Emails

The two supervisors ranked *politeness* at the top of their lists. They both stated they would not accept disrespectful emails. One participant said she could not accept an email without a salutation and closing, or one with too many informal abbreviations, slangs and spelling mistakes. This verified the study conducted by Stephens, Houser and Cowan (2009). Moreover, they also appreciated the emails with shorter content and clear requests so that they could respond to their students effectively.

It should be noted that the two participants both used multiple standards to evaluate an email. For them, a student’s progress is of great importance no matter how poor his or her English was. Also, the interview data indicates that supervisors’ tolerance to an email depends on their relationship with their students. In other words, a closer relationship means higher tolerance (Stephens, Houser & Cowan, 2009).

Theme Three: Supervisors’ Recommended Writing Strategies

Basically, the two participants did not offer much advice. However, they both mentioned the damage caused by sending flaming (angry) emails. They suggested that the best way to avoid sending this email is to wait until the senders had completely calmed down.

Theme Four: Emails as a Teaching Tool

Participant D saw the power of email as a teaching tool to improve students' English in the email communication. He always gave students feedback about their language problems and was happy to see students making progress.

Question Three: What are the commonalities and differences in their views of their experiences?

The comparison between student participants' and supervisors' categories reveals their different perspectives on email writings. Novice student writers are more concerned about whether their email writing was good enough to be accepted by their supervisors. They were not only worried about the language proficiency, but about communication as well. In contrast, supervisors have a more tolerant attitude than students towards English proficiency. Though one participant mentioned that Chinese students make article and pronoun mistakes, their emails were still readable and were not regarded as a major problem during the communication. The professors were flexible in evaluating students' emails and were happy to see students making progress in their writing.

Another difference is that most Chinese student participants placed more emphasis on the content in the email than other components. This indicates that they were not confident in their language ability and worried if their request could be clearly conveyed. As one participant said "Though a student does not do a good job in

writing a polite email, it is still OK if he can make himself well understood.”(Z)

However, supervisors rank politeness at the top. The two supervisors all stated that they would not accept a rude email.

The interview data also showed similarities between student participants and the supervisors. They both agreed on the importance of the briefness in an email. Both student and supervisor participants thought that listing main points and making spaces between each point was a good strategy especially when talking about a complex issue. Moreover, the requests in an email should be clear and actionable.

In sum, Chinese graduate students attach great importance on their email writing to their supervisors and regard email communication as a tool to create a positive image. In order to create appropriate emails, they use various strategies. However, they often do not use proper sequencing in their emails to accommodate native speakers’ reading and they often use unnecessary moves in emails. Additionally, most students cannot tell the difference in politeness strategies, though they show a deferential attitude in their emails. Their low language proficiency and cultural differences have become obstacles to effective communication and negatively affect their confidence in their writings. Additionally, though supervisors spoke highly of Chinese students’ emails, the number of the participants is small and more data should be collected to substantiate these professors’ attitudes. Ultimately, the study data shows students and supervisors agree about what constitutes a “good” email. Chinese students are on the right track.

5.3 Limitations, Recommendations and Conclusion

The limitations of this study were discussed in chapter three. Participants were selected only at Memorial University, so the findings may not be applicable to other universities. The smaller number of supervisor participants is another shortcoming of this study. Of all the student participants, only one student (Participant P) was a second year student. The other participants were first year students. Writing experiences from more senior students may be required to make a comparison with that of the first year students. Also, the transition of a student's writing experiences from his first year to last year in the university would contribute strong data to this area.

According to the findings of this study, Chinese graduate participants cannot differentiate request strategies and thus use more direct requests than indirect requests and hints. In addition, all the student participants present their requests at the end of their emails. This contributes to negative first impressions via email communication. Chinese graduate students are recommended to use more indirect requests in their emails. Moreover, the request should be presented early when they describe a complicated topic so that supervisors can grasp their purpose right off. Baugh's (2011) nine moves model and the CCARP frame work are practical models for students to follow. In addition, supervisors' emails can be used as models for Chinese students. It is suggested that supervisors make good use of this tool to improve students' English writing skills and to encourage them to be more critical and creative. Based on

interview data and document analysis, it seems to be true that student-supervisor relationships also influence students' writing styles. Due to the lack of enough email samples, this finding still need to be further substantiated.

Also, novice writers do not have to be too anxious about making lexical and syntactical mistakes in their emails. Email, after all, is a communication tool rather than a language test. They are supposed to make their emails brief and polite. The requests in the email should also be actionable. When a topic is too abstract and complicated due to the low language proficiency, a recommendation would be to ask professors for a face-to-face appointment. Also, the result of this study indicates that Chinese graduate students also need to use more negotiation strategies in their emails.

Finally, it should be noted that some Chinese graduate students still have low English writing proficiency. In order to solve the problems in email writing, ESL educators are encouraged to help Chinese graduate students establish practical and effective English learning plans for writing emails. Supervisors should realize the importance of email as a teaching tool to promote their Chinese students' writing ability. On the other hand, students need to cultivate their interest in writing and develop a positive ongoing learning habit.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Title: An Exploration of Chinese Graduate Students' Email Communication with Supervisors

Researcher: LingxiaoYue

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You are invited to take part in a research project entitled “An exploration of Chinese graduate students’ email communication with supervisors”.

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study at any time. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, *LingxiaoYue*, if you have any questions about the study or for more information not included here before you consent.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

I am a Chinese graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University. As part of my Master's program, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr.Badenhorst.

This study aimed at investigating Chinese graduate students' characteristics of email writing to the supervisors, thus providing them with advice to improve their email writing and promoting a positive relationship with their supervisors.

If you agree to participate in my study, I will interview you one on one for about 60 minutes at a time and location convenient to you.

You have right to withdraw if you do not want to continue with the study. You can inform me through face-to-face meetings, text messages, emails or telephone calls. If you do not want me to keep your information already collected from the interview or email, I will remove it immediately, and your data will not appear in my thesis. Otherwise, after I finish the report, I will email the first draft of it to you. In this study, there will be no consequences caused by participants' withdrawal.

There may be risk that some questions in the interview may bring back participants' uncomfortable memories of their past writing experience or memories with supervisors or students, but the risk is minimal. If the participants' frustration is beyond consolation, I will recommend that they visit a counsellor on campus or seek other professional counselling services.

The audio data will be recorded with an MP4 player, and then transferred to a special folder in my personal computer. The participants' emails and the transcription will be saved in my computer as well. When the research finishes, all the data will be transferred into a password-protected USB device. Then it will be locked in a suit case with my other belongings. Then the suitcase will be locked into my supervisor's cabinet in her office. The data folder in my computer will then be deleted. Nobody, other than me, will have access to it. Aliases will be used to protect anonymity of the participants in coding, writing, and any future publications and presentations. Data will be kept for a minimum of five years, as per Memorial University policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research.

The data collected from you will be used in my thesis, and possibly conference presentations and academic publications. The data will be reported using direct quotations and in an aggregated or summarized form.

When the study completes, the e-copy of the result will be delivered to all participants.

You are welcome to ask questions at any time during your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact me using the above contact information.

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that any data collected from you up to the point of your withdrawal will be destroyed.

If you sign this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

I have read what this study is about and understood the risks and benefits. I have had adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.

- ☐ I agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation at any time.
- ☐ I agree to be audio-recorded during the interview/focus group
- ☐ I do not agree to the use of quotations and do not want my name to be identified in any publications resulting from this study
- ☐ I agree to the use of quotations but do not want my name to be identified in any publications resulting from this study.
- ☐ I agree to the use of quotations and that my name be identified in any publications resulting from this study.
- ☐ A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

Confidentiality Agreement

I, _____, promise solemnly that I will not disclose the names of the participants whom I know to anyone else except for the researcher. I will do whatever I can to keep my promise and respect the confidentiality of the members of this research.

Signature of participant

Date

Researcher's Signature:

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Project: An Exploration of Chinese Graduate Students' Email Communication with Supervisors

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: LingxiaoYue

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

This study aimed at investigating Chinese graduate students' characteristics of email writing to the supervisors, thus providing them with advice to improve their email writing and promoting a positive relationship with their supervisors. The data will be collected with MP4 player. It takes 30-60 minutes to finish this interview.

Questions for students:

1. Can you remember the first time you wrote email to your supervisor?
2. Could you tell me your experience of the latest time you emailed to your supervisor?
3. What is the difference between the two experiences?
4. How did you feel about writing the first email to your supervisor?
5. How did you feel about writing the latest email to your supervisor?
6. What methods or strategies do you often use to write an email to your supervisor?
7. What do you think the most important thing is in writing an email to your supervisor?
8. What is your writing process?
9. Are you satisfied with your email writing to your supervisors? If not, could you tell me why?
10. Do or did you have problems in writing emails to your supervisor?
11. If you have or had, what strategies do or did you use to solve the problems?
12. If not, could you tell me why?
13. How do you like your email writing?
14. Have you thought of how to improve your email writing?
15. If so, what are your thoughts?

Questions for supervisors

1. What is your experience of reading your students' emails?
2. What is your experience of reading Chinese students' emails?
3. How did you feel when you read Chinese students' emails?

4. Do you have problems in reading Chinese students' emails? If so, could you tell me what troubles you?
5. Is there difference between Chinese students' emails and English native students' emails?
6. If so, could you tell me what it is?
7. What is your process of writing an email to your students?
8. What methods or strategies do you use to write an email?
9. What do you think the most important thing is in writing an email?
10. What do you think a good email is like?
11. What is your suggestion for your Chinese students to write a good email?